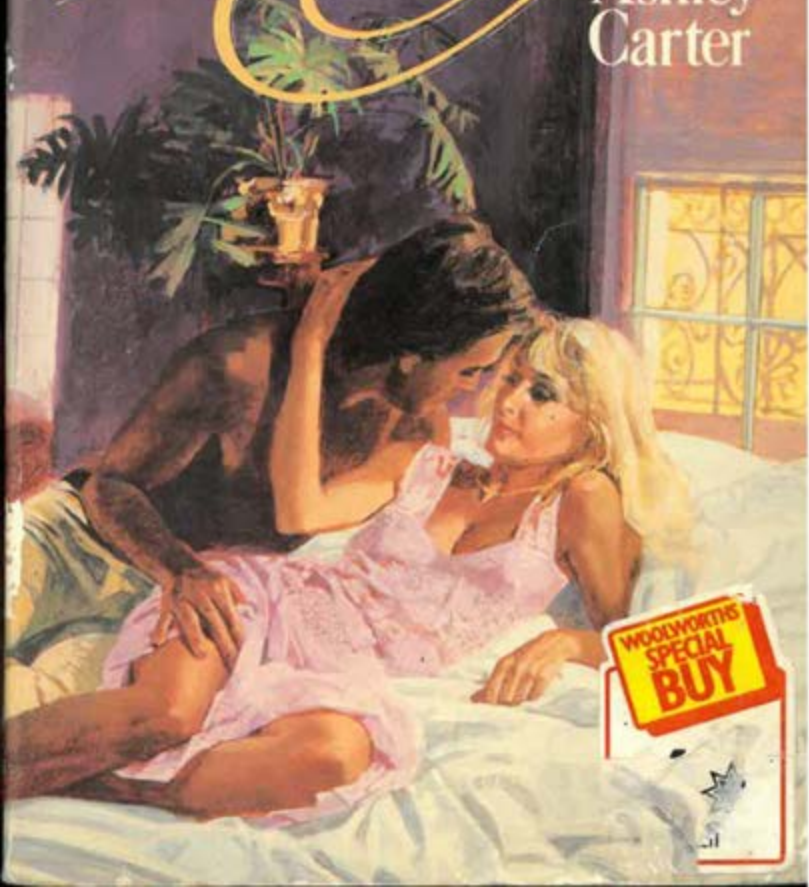


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great Blackoaks saga

A FAREWELL TO BLACKOAKS

Ashley
Carter



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A FAREWELL TO BLACKOAKS

Lizabeth shook her head, as if rejecting the threat of ruin, and hurried toward the wide, winding staircase. All she wanted was to get into her room, lock the door, remove her clothing, somehow wash away all traces of this afternoon and that vile peeping tom. Who could it have been? Some man who hoped to compromise her? Someone who was going to spread the story from one end of town to the other?

A sharp, insistent knocking at the door stopped her cold. For a long beat, she stood unable to move.

Who was it? Had it started already?

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Ashley Carter



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*Dark ran the river. And swift
is the tide. Silent, it winds,
Twisting through mossy fen and shadowy lea,
Till finally it finds
Its lonely path does lead home –
to a vast and empty sea. . . .*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When the first Blackoaks trilogy ended with the marriage of young Ferrell Baynard and Lorna Garrity, whom he'd loved so passionately, devotedly and hopelessly for so long, in *Heritage of Blackoaks* (published by W. H. Allen, 1982), barely two years had elapsed between the death of Ferrell Baynard, Snr, in *Master of Blackoaks* (1977) and the fiery slave rebellion in *Secret of Blackoaks* (1979).

There is a time gap here of more than twenty years. This novel opens an entirely new era in the lives of the Baynards of Blackoaks. It is a segment of that larger Blackoaks canvas, but a fragmented part, and for a purpose: the lives, loves, dreams, hopes, the very fabric of existence of Southern people – and to a lesser, but no less agonizing, degree of their Northern 'enemies' – were forever shattered, fragmented, broken, disrupted and sometimes, eternally destroyed, by the savage and bloody war between the states, 1861–1864.

The protagonist of this present novel is one of the seven children – four sons and three daughters – of Ferrell and Lorna Baynard. His drama is played out far from his beloved plantation home, his family and loved ones, all of which are irretrievably lost to him – a tragic situation endured many times in heartbreak, loneliness and futile yearning by displaced and sometimes nameless men and women.

Ashley Carter
Indian Rocks Beach, Fla 1983

PART ONE

1866 THE WIFE

I

They were so engrossed in each other that at first they did not even hear the furtive rustling in the underbrush. Dry leaves rattled; branches, jostled, snapped back, loud in the disturbed silence. They lay entangled in naked, savage embrace and it was not until, in stunning apex of frenzied climax which almost hoisted them off their blanket in their fury, that the sound, repeated, finally reached them in the sunlit copse and pierced their fevered consciousness. She shoved him away, crying out.

'Somebody's out there.'

She looked around in the tiny clearing, terrified. Shadows took on sudden threatening forms among the pines. All around her, sharp skitterings became menacing movements in the wild forest; crackling, flitters and clatters and waiting, brittle silences were alien and ominous in that serene and abandoned glade.

He nodded, warning her to remain still. Despite the thundering of pulses in his temples and the deafening pound deep inside his eardrums, he too had sensed – rather than heard – that stealthy padding in the underbrush. At first he'd dismissed the sound, thinking it might be an animal, hoping it was some wild creature, and finally, acknowledging that beasts crept silently through the most convoluted thickets. He sat up, trying to get his breath after their savage gyrations. He watched her hug her arms across her bared breasts.

'Who could it be?' Her whisper was taut.

'I don't know. Somebody prowling out there. I'll find out.' He cursed impotently at this evil intrusion, getting faint satisfaction from stringing together foul, outraged oaths.

He levered himself upward, unselfconsciously naked, to

his feet. He took up his crumpled lemon-coloured trousers with stove-pipe thin legs. He fought to keep his balance as he thrust his long, heavily muscled legs into them; but the fabric was so tight and he was so apprehensive that pulling the breeches up over his hips took a long, sweated time. As he secured the top button, he glanced down at his body, quite satisfied with what he saw, able to appreciate his own male beauty, even in a situation like this. His skin, a dark, old bronze colour, glowed with golden highlights of marbled perspiration in the sunlight.

He tried to pull on his hand-tooled leather boots while standing up, but he was clumsy, almost toppling, and the hell of it was, his legs were weak. God knew, this frenzied woman had almost drained him dry this time, and left him as shaky as a leaf in the wind.

Yanking on his boots, he looked down at her, this golden goddess who had haunted his dreams since the first time he saw her. His heart quickened at her blonde nakedness, the coral tips of full breasts, the slender hips, undulant and smooth and fiery. He'd never met or fantasized any golden girl more fragilely, blondely lovely, delicately beautiful, even in her terror, with the leaf-filtered sun highlighting her hair and rimlighting her body. Ay, God, what a time to be interrupted.

Her voice sounded shaken with fear. 'I knew it was crazy, coming out here.'

'Three miles from town? A dense forest? If this isn't safe, where in hell would we be safe?'

They remained unmoving another moment, staring into the wild hogberry bushes, the cherry and volunteer grapevines that encased this clearing. They'd been too involved to hear anyone approaching from the roadway. The sudden rustling of the choke cherry limbs was terrifying in the forest quiet. They waited and the silence stretched. Neither of them was reassured by the stillness. The shadowed watchfulness of the forest intensified their dread. In their nakedness, they were vulnerable, and the unknown prowler posed a ruinous threat. She bit back a sob

of rage and fright, keeping it all inside her, as she always smothered her most painful emotions.

He finally managed to shove his feet into his boots in the desperate silence. The backs of his knees felt too weak to support his weight. He tried to smile reassuringly. Then, bare to the waist, his trousers caught only at the belt button at the top of his fly, he strode across to the buggy and took up the handgun he carried on the boot seat under leather cushions.

Watching him, Lizabeth drew a faint sense of reassurance at the width of his shoulders, the corded muscled chest on which his dark paps appeared like aged doubloons. He was not what she wanted, but she didn't know what she did want, and Tam – young, lithe, slender-hipped, long-legged – was a practised lover. No man had ever been as smoothly expert and unhurried in his lovemaking, guaranteeing her enjoyment and satisfaction by pacing and controlling himself to assure her fulfillment and gratification. He enslaved her and yet at the same time she felt secure and protected in his arms.

Without realizing it, she saw him as he wanted her to see him. His hair was straight, black and oily, brushed back from his face, with a suggestion of greased-out kinkiness; but as she saw it, it set off his handsome face. She watched him move with feline grace across the clearing, forgetting that she'd thought him altogether too handsome, that she had seen a self-indulgence and sensuality that made his tall, strong body appear somehow soft. His eyes were too black, shaded by lashes that were too long. The brows were arched and regular; his features were almost too sharply hewn, the nostrils a little too flared, the lips too large and too red and the cleft in his chin almost artificially pretty. But he had a smile that women found irresistible; she found it irresistible; it promised – and demanded – everything, at once.

He plunged into the dry undergrowth, making no effort to be quiet. He even hoped his pursuit would flush out the quarry or the hunter, or whatever it proved to be out there.

His high-polished boots were loud on the dead leaves, and he broke through the brush swiftly, searching. He found nothing, but this did not relieve his tensions. He discovered boot prints in the damp, pine-needle and leaf-strewn red soil. He stopped, hearing the loud pound of hooves, moving swiftly away.

Exhaling, holding the gun carelessly at his side, he walked back to where Lizabeth still crouched on the blanket. When she saw him emerge from the brush, she began to dress.

‘You didn’t see anyone?’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘But they were there all right. I heard a horse being ridden fast toward the road.’

She winced. ‘You didn’t get a look at all, to see who it might have been?’

He sighed, shaking his head again. ‘I told you. I saw no one. But he was here, all right. Watching.’

Her face went paler than ever. ‘He saw us . . . naked . . . he saw us doing it?’

‘I’m afraid so.’ He slipped on a white, ruffled silk shirt, stuffed it into his trousers and buckled his belt.

‘Someone – spying on us.’ She shuddered.

He tossed his grey jacket over the backrest of the buggy seat. ‘Would your husband follow us? Would he have us followed?’

‘Maston? Why would he do that?’

He gave her a strange, taunting grin. ‘I am Cuban, *querida*. Not American. I would not know why Americans behave as they do.’

She shivered again. ‘Don’t Latins get jealous?’

‘*Ciertamente*. But we don’t lurk and spy. We’re very direct in our response to betrayal. We don’t sneak around and hide . . . We kill.’ He stared at the gun a moment and then replaced it under the buggy seat cushion.

He turned back as she shifted her full breasts into her camisole, and watching her touch her own breasts inflamed him anew. Even troubled by the peril into which they’d been plunged by this unseen watcher, he felt himself roused

again, growing empty with sudden longing.

The way it had been with her rushed back over him, like a fever, like a recurring dream. She had spread their blanket on the deep cushion of pine-needles, anxious. He'd felt himself grow painfully rigid at her eagerness, and he no longer cared about anything else. He had to have her now. He'd never wanted any other woman so terribly because he'd never seen such a cool, patrician blonde so openly avid for it, quivering in anticipation that acted like a violent aphrodisiac upon him. God knew, Hempton had not lied about this filly! He'd managed to hold himself in leash as he undressed her, tossing her clothing carelessly aside from their blanket.

She'd stood submissive and unmoving and pliant as he undressed her. He still could not believe he was being handed all this beauty on a platter, like some gift thrust upon him. As her golden body was bared to him, his eyes widened and his heart slugged. He'd seen her naked before, but her loveliness was eternally new. She writhed before him, anxious, impatient. She was like the maternal ancestor of Aphrodite herself, this girl who was not yet nineteen, with all the stunning blonde beauty of fresh and untouched flowers. Jesus. She held herself cheaply, as lovely as she was. But this was no responsibility of his. His was to take and not to reason why, to enjoy and not to question. Dressed, she looked like the most remote and untouchable of all Southern gentlewomen, but naked, she breathed hotly, unable to restrain desires that fevered in her blood, no longer controlled by any artificial restraints or restrictions imposed by the puritanical, inhibited society in which she lived.

When she'd lain down for him on the blanket, nude, the sun touching at her through high-canopied trees, he'd gazed at her for a long breathless moment. He'd thrust himself to her and, sweetly agonized, they had lain still for another long anticipatory beat, clinging to each other.

He'd kissed her swollen lips, at first gently. She'd felt his heated mouth upon hers and opened her lips to him. She

pressed her head upward, returning his kiss passionately. Her mouth parted wide, she struggled in his arms in answer to his savage thrusting, in hungry surrender upon that blanket. She'd crushed her full breasts against the corded muscles of his old-bronze chest.

'I've been crazy for you ... dying ... Anything you want, Tam ... Anything. Anything you want me to do, you've just to – to tell me ...'

Inflamed, he thrust deeply into her. If his mouth had not been clamped over hers, his tongue deep in her throat, she would have screamed in agonized ecstasy.

He gave her his best and he was proud of that best. Why shouldn't he be proud of what nature had endowed him? He had a superb body, which enthralled women. He was damned goodlooking. Women's admiring glances, and flattering mirrors, didn't lie about that. He knew how to please a woman. He'd studied the responses of the most exciting females in Havana. He knew a woman and her reactions. He could give them total satisfaction, something few men bothered to do. Ay, he was proud of his manhood. Goddamned proud.

The world was shut out. In a strange, giddy mindlessness, she lay prone, thrusting, driven wild by the strength and heat and hardness of his dark body. His hugeness filled her. She quivered and as he drove himself to her in sweet fury, she responded, the whole world barred. She was blind, deaf, numb to anything but the passion, and her body, abandoned to sensual stimulation and gratification. God knew how long that spy – that peeping tom – whoever he was – had stood there watching them in their mindless, enraptured thrashing. . .

When Lisabeth stood up, dressed, Tam tried to take her in his arms.

'No.' She shivered visibly and pushed him away. 'We've got to get out of here.'

He laughed and caught her in his embrace. 'Not until you tell me when I'll see you again – like this.'

'How can I?' She looked around, like a trapped animal. 'I don't know.'

'You must come back to me, Lizabeth. Soon . . . I promise you . . . We'll be more careful next time.'

'Next time? We face ruin. How can we talk about a next time when we don't know what scandal or gossip awaits us in town?'

'I can't give you up – just like that.'

She touched his face with the backs of her slender fingers. 'I want you, Señor Beauchard, more than you want me.' Her eyes brimmed with helpless tears. She had never been loved as she had here, in this hidden glen – under some sneak's watchful eyes. 'What can we plan – until we find out who that was spying on us?'

'But you will see me again?'

She nodded, helplessly. 'As soon as I can. As soon as it's safe. As soon as we learn who that vicious peeping tom was – and find out what he wants – from me – from you – from us.'

'I'll do whatever I can to protect you – and your name . . . But I do need to see you — '

'It may have been a blackmailer.'

'Or it may have been one of the good ole boys. In that case there will be gossip. Men gossip a hell of a lot more than women do, and you may as well resign yourself to that. . . . If there's talk it will likely get back to your husband.' He laughed deprecatingly, but taut. 'Even if husbands are always the last to know – last will be too soon – and damned inconvenient.'

Her eyes scanned his face. 'You make it sound like a game.'

'Well, we're in it. We can cry, or laugh, or make the best of it – but we can't escape it.'

She was not listening. She had caught up her linen skirt in her fist and she stood staring down at a long red streak of clay smeared across the fabric. Her eyes met his, stricken. 'Every time . . . I always take home a little bit of dirt from you.'

He laughed. 'That's the Baptist guilty conscience, my love. Your straitlaced church would go broke if there were no guilty feelings on Sunday morning for what you did Saturday night. . . .' His voice hardened, imperious. 'You don't have to come to me, you know.'

Her voice matched his. 'Why did you come then?'

He smiled. 'Because you're beautiful, *querida*. The most beautiful blonde woman I ever saw . . . I reckoned the cost. I knew you were married. But I also knew you wanted me.'

He shrugged. 'If your husband couldn't satisfy you – I wanted you . . . Why did you meet me that first time?'

She spread her hands. 'I couldn't help it. I didn't want to. Maybe I don't want to right now . . . But I couldn't resist.' She shuddered. 'And now look . . . I'm covered with vile.'

'Whatever it is, we'll just have to face it.'

Her mouth twisted. 'That's not clever, but it's true.'

'I'm not trying to be clever, *amor mio*.' He was irritated but he gave her a smile to conceal his inner petulance – the kind of smile that he'd learned many years ago in Havana no woman could resist. 'We are two very selfish people, my dearest one. Sometimes we smash things in order to take what we want. Eh?'

'Well, we may have smashed everything now.' She tilted her head, breathing raggedly. 'What's the matter with me? Except for my terror, I'd be reaching for you now. You unhinge me . . . Even when I know the truth about you.'

'The truth? About me?'

'You came to me only because Hampton Gates told you about me –'

'Told me what?'

'Don't lie. You know he did. The town whore. Did he say how much he liked it?' Her mouth twisted. 'Maybe it was he – spying on us –'

'Hampton? My God. Why?'

'Maybe he's jealous – now that you have me. . . . I know he told you about me. I saw that in your faces that first night. That was why you were so sure you could have me.' She made a downward, cutting gesture. 'Maybe he wants

me back.'

'Maybe he does. But he's out of luck. And if it was he, sneaking around watching us, I'll put the fear of God in him. I'm their biggest customer – my company is. Profit and loss – that buys you leverage – in anything. I hope it was Hampton. If so, I can take care of it. Easily.'

She smiled and went close to him. 'But – right now – we must go.'

'Yes. Let's get out of here.' He swung her up easily in his arms and placed her on the boot seat of the buggy. He leaped up beside her. She clung to his arm and they rode swiftly through the faintly marked trace from the hammock to the main road. In the silence they remained watchful and cautious.

They drove for almost two miles along the roadway, then turned off again to the hidden copse where they'd ground-tied her saddle horse, allowing it to graze.

Lizabeth turned toward Tam. She caught him in her arms and kissed him fiercely.

'When will I see you again?' he insisted, refusing to release her.

For the moment she could see only the ruin that faced her tomorrow and in all the days ahead. 'Soon,' she whispered, tracing his full red lips with the tip of her finger. 'Soon . . . as soon as we know something – anything. I promise.'

'I already know something.'

'Oh?'

'I already want you again.'

'I know.' She closed her hand on him, fiercely but fleetingly.

He sighed out heavily. 'At least old man Cliff Gates and Hampton will be pleased.'

Her head jerked up. 'Why?'

He laughed. 'Well . . . for the next few days at least, I'll be able to concentrate on business affairs . . . won't I?'

II

Lizabeth watched him leave. 'We're in this together,' he called over his shoulder to her, smiling. 'Don't worry.'

He winked at her and with a cavalier little salute of farewell, was gone, driving swiftly through clumps of waxmyrtle, white oak and loblolly pines.

Lizabeth stood with her horse's bridle in one hand, her other smoothing the animal's tan mane. She remained unmoving, trying to visualize in her mind when he would reach the road into town and turn along it.

Alone, she looked about at the silent and obscuring forest of the high country.

She felt no fear in this desolate locality, even recalling the peril a little while ago when she and Tam had been spied upon. She'd grown up in this area, riding, strolling, hunting violets, picnicking – and infrequently, if not chaperoned – making love with some local swain out here in the hot watches of late afternoon. It was her home territory. Not even the ugliness and threat of the intruder made it alien to her now.

Everywhere familiar landmarks surrounded her, shadowed in the dense grown hammocks, along the dim trails, on the roads and over the highest rising hill in the distance.

This was where she'd been reared, this was the hilly Florida panhandle, the beautiful country from which the Americans had driven the Spanish and Indians together. Their villages had been burnt down, their gardens and herds destroyed, and the tribes had fled south to the Everglades forty years ago. The last vestiges of their existence had vanished under growths of new pines and vegetation, swallowed up and forgotten in time. The forests reclaimed the abandoned tribal clearings and, above the seven hills of Tallahassee, this hammock country stretched eternally, wild and rugged, all scars concealed under deep green masses of thorny creepers.

She gathered her ankle-length skirts up above her knees

and slipped her sandal-shod foot into a stirrup and mounted her horse, swinging her leg across the saddle. She brought the animal under control expertly, stroking its neck, and moved out of the clearing.

Ducking her head, she passed through the vine-tangled clumps of pumpkin ash, lindens, sweetgum and wild-growing red mulberry which crouched in the shade of huge elms and white cucumber trees. She followed the faint traces left by Tambura's carriage wheels in the grassy earth to the edge of the hard-packed roadway, cut through this dense and silent timberland.

No one approached from either direction and she exhaled in relief. She headed toward town, in the tracks laid down by a fast-driving Tambura, but then abruptly slowed.

She rode slowly, hesitant and tentative. She didn't want to enter town from the north as Tam would; when the gossip erupted people would remember vividly her passing in Beauchard's wake. On the other hand, trouble started when one tried to be clever in eluding a trap. Sometimes the best defence was the simple strategy of charging ahead as if one had nothing to hide. However, she did have something to hide; there was no sense pretending they hadn't been seen together out here, naked and in embrace. She had to live with that truth and her own guilty conscience. She usually said to hell with the gossips – if they were talking about her they were letting some other poor devil have a moment of peace – but now there was too much at stake. It was one thing to be arrogant and insolent in the face of disaster, it was quite another to be stupid and foolhardy.

By the time she reached a faintly outlined trail heading west through the hammocks, she'd made up her mind. She'd give the gossips no grist for their mills; whatever they heard, she would not make it easy for them.

She cantered easily, riding wide of the town, going west and then angling circuitously south. The afternoon air was hot, but softer breezes soothed her in all the shadowed places along the trace. She passed abandoned huts, doors ajar, gates off hinges, fields rampant with thistles, a fruit

orchard blighted and untended and aged-greyed snake-fence with half its rails stolen or rotted.

She entered the more populous area. Smoke rose from fieldstone chimneys and she saw more houses, with children in the fenced yards and men working in ploughed fields as she approached the town uphill from the south. Riding her horse again, the saddle between her legs, Lizabeth began to feel better, to hope and to look for ways out. Sunshine blazed down upon her in the open areas, warming, comforting, reassuring.

Less than half-a-mile from downtown, Lizabeth shifted in the saddle. She caught her leg around the pommel, riding sedately side-saddle and smoothing down her dress over her legs decorously.

People looked up from the shadowed overhangs of store fronts, verandas and the shade of tall elms and sycamore trees. They recognized her and most of them nodded politely and spoke her name. Their restrained attitude affirmed her reputation as the fastest girl in the county, but their courtesy recognized her inviolate social status as the daughter of a state supreme court justice and, even more importantly, as the doctor's wife.

With a sudden, swift movement concealed under her flowing skirts, Lizabeth slammed her heel into the horse's flank with all her strength; at the same time, she jerked hard on the bridle. The bit cut the animal's tender mouth and it reared, squealing. The baffled horse fought two simultaneous signals, two flares of pain – one which said gallop, the other demanding an immediate halt.

The beast reared suddenly, eyes rolling, and when Lizabeth loosened her grip on the bridle, the horse took the bit in its teeth and raced uphill, for the moment out of control, in a frenzy of pain.

For almost two blocks through the downtown, Lizabeth appeared to fight, to grab leather, to hang on for dear life, riding precariously side-saddle as she was.

Disturbed, dogs raced barking from shade, yapping, snarling and snapping at the horse's fast-churning legs.

Lizabeth's rich blonde hair, shaken free, furred in the wind.

People stood, immobile, stunned.

'My God! The horse is running away - '

'It's Doc Devereau's wife - '

'Her mount's taken the bit - '

'Damn animal's gone crazy - '

'Help her . . . somebody help her.'

Men ran out into the street. They lunged and grabbed at the lines, but the horse, now frightened more than ever, raced past while Lizabeth swayed in the saddle and though apparently fought the reins, truly didn't attempt to head him because he was a well-trained animal which responded at the touch of her hand, an inflection of her voice.

Men came running from all sides, out of houses, the doors slamming behind them, from stores and shade trees, barring the street, running head-on to halt the terrorized runaway. Finally, in the midst of yelling and chaos, Lizabeth was able to get her horse under control.

She slowed the animal, smoothing its neck with her hand and settling herself in the side-saddle, her hair loose and spilling in flattering golden snarls down about her shoulder blades.

Her wan smile thanked all the men who had tried to help her. Her blonde hair loose and wild about her ceramic-smooth cheeks, lovelier than ever, pallid as they were, she bowed to them, straightened in the saddle, smoothed her dress and rode sedately through town to Park Avenue and north to Macomb Street.

As soon as she left the chattering mob behind her, Lizabeth relaxed in the saddle. Her smile chilled. One truth was certain. People would remember her, this afternoon, and the runaway, and the undeniable fact that she had entered town from the south. These facts would be branded in their memories. In fact they would neither soon forget nor quit discussing her extraordinary bravery and her expert display of horsemanship in quieting a runaway. . . .

Lizabeth leaned down from her saddle and loosened the

latch on the wooden gate to the Macomb Street entrance to her barnyard.

Inside, she closed the gate and secured it behind her. Then she rode warily across the yard to the stables.

Her colonial type home dominated the block, set in a grassy acre of tree-studded and flower-plotted ground. Across the front along Park and down the Macomb Street side, a white picket fence ran the width and depth of the property. The other two sides, thick with gardenia hedges and azaleas, were enclosed in four-foot wire fencing stretched taut between green-stained cypress posts.

The house, twelve large rooms, was almost thirty years old. It had been built on the town outskirts, but was now almost downtown, near the business section and the Capitol. Built of planed lumber, with bay and dormer windows, cypress-shakes roofing, it was encircled by a wide veranda with courtesy roof overhang and hand-carved balustrades. Tall, floor-to-ceiling windows opened from downstairs rooms. Upstairs, under gables, cornices and slanting eaves, other windows, open to afternoon breezes, showed billowing curtains.

Lizabeth especially loved the wide, encircling veranda most of all. There was about it a nostalgic sense of quiet beauty and utility in its shadowed expanse. Two swings marked each end of the long front porch. Cane-back rocking chairs formed small atolls all around the house. The home in which she'd been born and reared, like this one, had a large open porch, with swings and chairs and tables, and vine-shaded nooks, like some eternal kingdom for children, remote hideaways for secrets and whispers and vagrant promises and exciting, stolen kisses.

She shivered. All this grace of living was threatened, a bubble about to burst. She looked about, filled with terror.

Jim Watkins came hurrying from the double doors of the two-storied barn. He caught the horse's reins.

'Afternoon, Mis Liz.' He bobbed his head, shadows glittering in his eyes at the sight of her hair tumbling loose about her shoulders. 'My. My. Ain't ole Soldier worked up

a sweat and lather, though?’

Lizabeth shrugged. She slid from the saddle and braced herself as her feet struck the ground. ‘It’s hot. We took a long ride.’

‘Yes’m.’ His gaze lowered under hers.

Something in the black man’s tone angered Lizabeth and she jerked up her head. This Negro, though officially freed by Lincoln’s proclamation five years ago and actually franchised by Lee’s surrender at Appomatox almost two years ago, behaved as if still enslaved to her husband. Watkins had been born a slave on her husband’s family estate in Alabama somewhere. She was never truly comfortable with him, never certain how far she could trust him where her husband was concerned.

Watkins, of medium height and stocky build, was in his early thirties, but his cap of kinky hair was already edged in grey, like cotton puffs above his ears. His skin was sooty coloured, what people around her called ‘bush-nigger’ black. His forehead was short, his brow ridged, and his ebony eyes were deep set. His short nose was flat, nostrils large and flared. He smiled easily, his voice was deep and calm, and he had, even to Lizabeth, one of the gentlest faces of any man. But there remained about him that deep core of fierce and unswerving love and loyalty to his employer that would be much more seemly, she admitted, in the doctor’s wife.

She was afraid of Jim though he’d never given her the slightest cause for concern or suspicion. It was just that he had been given to Maston as a ‘body slave’ when he was five years old; the world had changed around him, but Jim Watkins had not altered. He belonged to Maston Devereau, body and soul. This meant that Jim Watkins, gentle face, kindly smile and quiet voice, could be her most dangerous enemy.

He turned the horse toward the stable. ‘I best rub ole Soldier down real good,’ he said.

She nodded. ‘Is the doctor home yet?’

Jim turned slightly, pausing and glancing over his heavy

shoulder. Did something flicker, odd and threatening, in those ebony eyes, or was it only her imagination, fevered and overworked? His voice was impeccably courteous. 'No, ma'm. The doctor ain't home jus' now. He was here an' all, but he's gone out and ain't come back to now. . . .'

Lizabeth walked across the yard and up the steps to the screened back porch. She did not bother to roll her hair or try to catch it-up. It didn't matter since Maston wasn't home anyway.

She went through the shadowed pantry into the large, country-style kitchen. This room, in which Lizabeth was more helpless, ill-at-ease and inexpert than all others, was oversized and had obviously been the heart of the old house when it had been built almost thirty years ago as 'the old Curtis Meares place'. Well, Curtis and all the other Meares were gone, scattered, dead and forgotten. Now, it was 'Doc Devereau's place'. Maston had bought the abandoned home comparatively reasonably. He had spent a great deal of money and time and sweat and shared labour with Jim Watkins painting, restoring and improving.

This country kitchen, utilitarian, larger even than the formal parlour where Lizabeth entertained, was the sparkling, freshly painted and scrubbed domain of the mustee woman who worked over the drain, working the pitcher pump beside the porcelain sink Maston had installed with direct drain to the ground beneath the flooring. Beyond her a short stairway led down to the cooling room below ground. The walk-in pantry, through which Lizabeth passed from the rear porch had shelves from floor to ceiling, all packed tightly with carefully labelled canned and preserved foods, spices, condiments. Stained maple-wood cupboards were set in the upper walls, along with racks for heavy knives, spoons, ladles and forks of every shape. The drainboard workspace on each side of the sink was extra deep, as were the cupboards below it. An iron wood-burning stove sat out from the wall on ornamented casters. Near wide screened windows was a

large pinewood table where the servants ate.

Two other doors led out of the kitchen, one to a narrow stairway to the upper floors and the drafty attic where once slaves had slept, and the other to the family dining room and through it to the formal dining room and corridors beyond.

Without bothering to speak to the mustee woman at work near the sink, Lizabeth crossed the room toward the dining room, but the cook turned and spoke to her. Exhaling heavily in her impatience, Lizabeth paused and glanced over her shoulder. 'Miz Liz'beth, ma'm ...'

Carlotta turned from the drain and leaned against it, gazing at her mistress. Light-skinned and sloe-eyed, Carlotta was tall and slender, languidly beautiful with black hair severely parted in the middle and caught in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her body was supple and shapely. She perspired in the room redolent with odours of fresh baked bread and cooking food. Lizabeth glimpsed the hot cinnamon buns placed on the pinewood table to cool. Yeast-risen dough sprinkled with raisins dripped white sugar icing. These pastries were Carlotta's speciality, prepared for Dr Devereau's desserts and evening coffee. There wasn't anything Carlotta wouldn't do for 'the doctor'. Lizabeth drew a sharp impatient breath. If only these blacks cared for her as they venerated her husband, God knew life would be simpler, easier and one hell of a lot pleasanter for her.

'What do you want, Carlotta?'

The cook's brow tilted slightly and she grinned. 'My. My. Ain't we all blowed apart though?'

'What do you want?'

'Your maw be sick did she know you was out in public with your hair down loose and wild like that.'

'I've no doubt my mother will know. As soon as you can run yapping to Mabel. ... The horse got out of hand and my hair fell loose. ... I do hope that's all right with you.'

'It's all right with me, Miz Liz'beth, long as you feel it's right.'

'Whatever I do is right, Carlotta. Now what did you want?'

'I heard somethin' this afternoon that I knowed you would want to hear. Yo' frien' Miz Jennifer, why she - '

'Damn it, Carlotta. I don't want to hear some back fence gossip passed between you nigras. Whatever Miss Jennifer Keyes does is none of your black business. Do you understand? I won't have you and Fern-Belle trading lies about Jennifer and me - '

'I don't nevah lie about you, Miz Liz'beth - '

'I don't want you retailing what you see as the "truth", either. You bring home all that gossip about poor Jennifer. Don't you think I know you get the lowdown by trading off secrets about me - '

'I don't hardly nevah mention you, Miz Liz'beth.' Carlotta laughed and shook her head. 'Don't have to . . . black ladies always runnin' to me with latest things they is heard 'bout you. . . . Why, lawsy, Miz Liz'beth, I spend most of my time *denyin'* . . .'

'Well, I want you to stop gossiping with Jennifer's maid, or my mother's or anybody else's. If you don't, I'll have Doctor Devereau fire you.'

Carlotta straightened, standing tall and rigid. Her face went expressionless. 'If'n you feels thataway, Miz Liz'beth, why I reckon I can leave right now.'

'Oh, stop being a fool, Carlotta. You know you can't just walk out and leave dinner half-cooked. . . . I just don't want to hear any more of your back fence prattle. It's got to stop. You black women are going to ruin the reputations of every nice woman in town if you don't stop.'

'We don't spile no reputations, Miz Liz'beth, we jes kinely pass the news. Always befo' you anxious to hear - you sho' has changed fast and sudden-like.'

'Well, maybe I have changed. Whatever, I don't want to hear any more of it.' She exhaled sharply and tilted her head. 'Heat some water and have Tina bring it up to me. I want to have a bath before the doctor comes home.'

'Supper's nigh about ready. Havin' roast lamb and mint

jelly, nice aspic salad and sweet potato pie – like Doctor is partial to.'

'Well, the doctor has gone out. We'll just wait dinner . . . You just send up that hot water – and stop dealing in hearsay.'

Lizabeth walked, empty-bellied, across the family dining room where Tina was putting the final touches on the table.

'Dinner will be late, Tina,' Lizabeth said, though she knew the slender black girl had overheard every word of the conversation from the kitchen. 'Doctor has gone out again. He may be late.'

'Yes'm.' Tina didn't look up from setting the table.

Though the family dining room was 'second best', they had been able to buy a beautiful mahogany dining set in the Sheraton style, along with dish-cabinet and matching buffet, hand-carved and hand-rubbed. If it was not an original, it was an excellently rendered copy and certainly not factory manufactured. The white linen tablecloth gleamed in the saffron glow of early-lit lamps. Meissen-style porcelain plates, dishes, cups and saucers, featuring hand-painted, fired-enamel violets and asters, had been set out on the cloth, with blackberry-patterned water tumblers of flint glass, oddly blue in the light, and heavy, carved silverwear and starched white napkins.

Lizabeth hurried through to the corridor, not wanting to become involved in any conversation with Tina. She didn't want to talk to anybody just now. She thanked the capricious gods that Maston wasn't at home. She wanted to remove the clay-smeared dress, have a bath and brush and put-up her hair. Carlotta's casual proffer of gossip had brought back her terror and fears that had ebbed slightly on the long, roundabout ride home.

She shook her head, as if rejecting the threat of ruin, and hurried toward the foyer and the wide, winding staircase. All she wanted was to get into her room, lock the door, remove her clothing, somehow wash away all traces of this afternoon and that vile peeping tom. Who could it have

been? A hunter who came upon them accidentally, someone who had followed them? And if they'd been followed, why? Blackmail? Some man who hoped to compromise her? Someone who was going to spread the story from one end of town to the other?

She ran her hand through her rich, thick golden hair, pushing it back from her face. She gripped the Newel post, turning to ascend the stairs.

A sharp, insistent knocking at the door stopped her cold. For a long beat, she stood unmoving, unable to move.

Her knuckles whitened on the post. Who was it? Had it started already?

She wanted to continue walking upstairs, to enter her room, lock her door and let Tina answer the knocking. She was afraid to do that; almost as afraid as she was to answer it herself.

She stood stricken as the heavy fists rattled the thick magnolia-wood door again. She felt as if her heart pounded in her throat, choking her. She was dizzy, and the room skidded about her head.

She drew a deep breath, forcing herself to assume that cool calm exterior that was part of her by now, a cold, practised part – if you never let anyone see how badly they hurt you, they were impotent against you, weren't they?

She walked woodenly across the foyer. Her hand trembling, she reached out for the knob. Was this the terror-edged pattern of her life from now on? Is this the way she would react to every knock on her door?

She wished fervently that she could see through the thick door facing. Who was it out there? A casual visitor? Or was it the man who had watched Tam Beauchard drive her insane in that upland forest? Was she doomed to spend the rest of her life like this – afraid to answer her own front door, and more afraid not to?

III

Lizabeth opened the thick front door.

'Oh, my God,' she whispered. She shuddered, recoiling at what she saw there. Without moving, she retreated, withdrawing, trying helplessly to deny it all inside her mind.

Two men stood on the shadowed veranda. They half-carried the doctor's slumped body between them. One of them was medium tall, heavy-set, a man she'd known most of her life, and the other, the shorter uglier man had a penetrating, grinning gaze that had upset and discomfited her since the first time she'd encountered him on the streets downtown. The short fellow had his fist raised to strike the door facing again. He gave her that arrogant, unyielding smile when their eyes met.

Maston sagged between them. Only their gripping him under his arms kept him off his knees. She winced when she saw the now-familiar poke which he carried with exaggerated tenderness in both arms. She'd come to know what that poke meant, all right. Maston was still conscious, but barely; his handsome face was sweated, his eyes refused to focus, and his full-lipped mouth was twisted in a self-maligning smile.

Suspended between the two men, Maston gave her an embitteredly cordial bow. 'Forgive me, my dearest wife,' he said. 'But I'm just as drunk as you are.'

The two men laughed. 'One thing you got to say for Doc when he's tanked. He's a funny fellow. Entertains everybody. Ain't got a enemy in this world. I tell you, ma'm, we ought to pay him for drawing crowds and keeping 'em happy.' Walter-Tom McGee laughed, recalling the scene at his saloon. The stout man had owned the tavern on Monroe Street near the Capitol as long as Lizabeth could remember, a place he'd named The Senate Chambers. It was agreed that more political decisions, deals, trades and compromises were effected in McGee's tavern than in the halls, offices, or on the floor at the Capitol building down the street. Walter-Tom's greying hair was thick, unruly

across his pink forehead and around his ears. He wore a denim shirt, with sleeve gaiters and cuffs turned back at the wrist and open at the collar, broadcloth trousers, carpet slippers, and he'd not taken the time to remove his stained, damp and discoloured bar apron.

Lizabeth shivered. Catty women monitored every movement from their curtained windows along the two intersecting streets.

'I apologize for my condition, Mrs Devereau', the doctor said in sarcastic gentility. 'Unforgivable, I know. I'm sorry to say the neighbours will be talking. I'm also sorry to say I don't give a good goddamn . . . I do humbly regret my odour – it offends even me. Unfortunately, I threw up and I'm afraid it soiled my shirt front.'

'Couldn't you have brought him home before he got like this?' Lizabeth asked.

The shorter man laughed. 'He wouldn't come, until he got like this. We kept suggesting he go home, but he said he'd been home.' He gave her that unblinking smile and she felt the hackles creep at the nape of her neck. The bartender, Shirly Folkes, looked as if he knew damaging secret scandals hidden in one's innermost soul. He seemed to peer through fabrics to every woman's nakedness, enjoying himself and insolent about it.

Maston straightened, swaying, to his full six-feet of height – trembling like a slender pine in a gale. He gave her another deep bow and would have plunged forward to his face but the tavern owner and bartender grabbed him.

'I shall try to be as inoffensive and to make as little trouble for you, madam, as possible.' His mouth twisted as if he tasted something bitter. 'I assure you I would not have come here at all, but unfortunately, I live here. Unforgivable. Annoying. A nuisance. But true. . . . One of the sad vagaries of life . . . don't you think so?'

Lizabeth felt herself withdraw and go pale under his perverse civility and sardonic courtesy. He was mocking her, himself, their life together, and the totality of the world around them. She forced herself to smile, cold and

civil. 'We don't have to talk about it now, do we?'

'You got to forgive the doc, Miz Devereau,' Walter-Tom McGee said, voice warm. 'He drank down eight corn-likker shots with beer chasers. One right after the other - '

'And the doc is one of them men that shouldn't drink one,' Shirly Folkes said.

'That's right,' McGee nodded. 'Doc shouldn't drink at all. Can't tolerate the stuff, you know.'

'There is much in this life one cannot tolerate,' the doctor declaimed.

'What were you trying to prove?' Lizabeth asked in a low, taut voice.

'Why, we've got to prove the earth is round, my lovely wife,' Maston said. 'Until we do that, we're lost. Lost. All of us lost.'

McGee laughed again. 'He started in on "war is profit" as being the truth and "war is hell" is just a slogan for stupid minds who can accept slogans, but not the truth. I knew then it was time to get him on home.'

'Oh God,' Lizabeth said. 'Why do you make such a disgusting ass of yourself - in public?'

'Nobody found Doc disgustin', Miz Devereau,' McGee said. 'No, sir. He's only been in town little more'n a year, yet he's one of the most loved men in the whole region. He ain't disgustin'. Ain't nobody can dislike the Doc.'

'Do you people enjoy laughing at a stumbling, falling down drunk?' she inquired in a low, chilled tone.

'No ma'm. We see a decent, good man. He ain't got any enemies down at my place.'

'There are men so blessed with friends that he needs no enemies,' the doctor quoted again.

Lizabeth said, staring at the closed tavern truck and horses at the curb, 'Thank you, Mr McGee, for bringing my husband home - again. As always, I appreciate it. I am in your debt.'

'Ain't nuthin' we wouldn't do for Doc Devereau, ma'm,' Shirly Folkes said. His gaze crawled like revolting insects over her. Lizabeth felt her face flush hot. She watched

McGee and his bartender suspiciously, nervously. Had they already heard the gossip, the mortifying whispers?

She gripped her hands tightly at her side. The look in Folkes' face was knowing and irritating, but it always had been. He looked her over avidly, but he'd always done that, too. And the middle-aged McGee made no secret of the fact that he found Lizabeth Hayward the belle of northern Florida, the most exciting woman he'd ever seen. He laughed warmly when he said it, and it was her legacy left over from the days when she'd been the most talked about girl in the county – and her reputation even then less than unsullied.

It was difficult to find a change in their cavalier attitude toward her. Any consideration, respect and deference either of these town men paid her grew from their admiration for her husband and no high regard for her. Damn them. Damn them all.

The two men half-lifted the slender young doctor between them and crossed the highly polished foyer flooring. Maston's boot-toes traced a grey line through the thick wax and a rumpled throw rug was dragged to the base of the stairs.

McGee glanced toward Lizabeth questioningly. She nodded, gesturing with her head towards the upstairs. The two men knelt in unison, braced the doctor's arms upon their shoulders and started up the wide steps. Maston's legs struck each riser, and scraped each tread.

Drawing a deep breath, Lizabeth straightened the patterned rug at the foot of the stairs, simply because she was reluctant to follow. She went up the steps slowly, holding on to the polished balustrade.

The cavernous upper hallway was already shadowed, afternoon sunlight glowing through windows at each end. Doors along the carpeted corridor were closed. The highly polished floor reflected the paintings and mirrors along the off-white walls and the streaks of sunlight tossed in shimmering waves from the windows.

The two men awaited Lizabeth at the head of the stairs. Maston sagged between them, his head slumped between his shoulders. One might have thought he had passed out in a drunken stupor until one saw how gently, yet firmly, he cradled the poke in his arms.

'This way.' Lizabeth walked past them to the front right bedroom. She pushed open the door and stood inside it, holding it open for them. She held her breath, taut, because it was obvious that this was a man's room – and not one shared with a woman. A gunrack hung on one inner wall where once some Meares ancestor's portrait had rested. The mirrored dresser was cluttered with male furnishings, equipment and toiletries. The severely tan bedspread was masculine in tone and design. A double closet stood open, revealing boots, suits and shirts. There was not a touch of femininity in this room.

She exhaled heavily. More grist for the gossip mills.

The two men exchanged no glances and made no comments, but Lizabeth was less than reassured. The discussions would begin on the way back to the tavern. They crossed the room. Lifting the doctor gently, they laid him out at a long angle across the bed.

McGee caught the top of the closed poke and tried to remove the bag from the doctor's arms. But Maston struggled, embracing it tightly.

Lizabeth spoke sharply. 'It's all right. I'll take care of it.'

McGee nodded. 'Maybe you'd like us to kinely undress the doc and git him between the covers, Miz Lizabeth?'

She shook her head. She wanted only one thing, to be rid of McGee and his bartender. 'I'll manage, thank you.'

McGee shrugged. The two men bowed toward her and started from the room. Lizabeth followed. From the bed, Maston called, slurring the words. 'War is profit ... and don't you forget it ...'

They paused in the doorway, laughing. 'Sure, Doc,' McGee said. 'You take care now.'

'I want to thank you for your kindness,' Lizabeth said, following them along the carpet to the stairway. 'Though,

of course, I understand it is something you did for the doctor.'

'Did it for both of you, Miz Lizabeth. Knowed and loved you since you was a cotton-haired young'un runnin' loose,' McGee said. 'An' Doc is the salt of this here earth. You got a good man there, Miz Lizabeth. A fine man.'

Shirly Folkes nodded in agreement, his gaze stroking Lizabeth's loose golden hair and gliding downward along her throat to the bodice of her dress, the rise of her breasts. They went downstairs, hurrying, and she followed.

McGee paused in the open doorway and tried to smile reassuringly at her.

Trying to hurry them, Lizabeth said, 'I'm sorry for the trouble Doctor Devereau caused you, Walter-Tom . . . I regret that he threw up at your bar.'

The two men laughed. 'Oh, no ma'm,' McGee said. 'Doc didn't throw up at my bar.' He shook his head. 'No. Funny. He'd already throwed up – and was pretty rancid smellin' – when he come into the tavern.'

'That's right,' Folkes nodded, grinning at her, his eyes unyielding. 'Said it was something he et. . . . In fact, it really was funny. What he said was, it was somethin' he swallowed.'

They bowed again and went out the front door and Lizabeth exhaled heavily, closing it after them. She heard the lock snick into place and she sighed with relief. She leaned for a long moment against the hand-carved inner door facing, her shoulders slumped round, her head back. The bite of the sharp wood was a counteractive pain against her flesh.

Tina entered the darkening lower corridor from the family dining room. 'Was that the doctor come home, ma'm?' the Negro girl asked.

Lizabeth's anger flared. You know damned well who it was, she thought, and what condition he's in. She kept her patrician face cool and calm and her voice level. 'Yes. It was the doctor, Tina.'

'You wants me to say to Carlotta that dinner be served

soon, ma'm?

This time it was more difficult for Lizabeth to control her rage. She drew a deep breath and shook her head, forcing a faint, benign smile. 'I'll tell you when, Tina.'

She crossed the foyer and mounted the stairs. She could feel Tina watching from below. She sensed Maston awaiting her in that upstairs room. She saw behind her eyes Shirly Folkes's insulting smiling, McGee's unctious concern, and the way Tam's face had greyed when they finally heard the intruder in that underbrush. She felt desperately tired. She reached out and trailed her hand along the balustrade. She picked up her skirts above her ankles. She tried to hurry. She could not.

The bedroom door stood open and she entered it reluctantly.

Maston lay where they had placed him across the bed. He still clung to the poke. His eyes were open. He seemed to stare, unblinking, at the ceiling. She crossed the room and stood at the side of the bed beside his legs and boots which hung over the side of the thick mattress. She waited but he did not speak.

'Give me the bag,' she said. 'I'll put it on the bedtable for you. It will be there when you want it.'

He said nothing, but did not protest when she removed the poke from his chest. She left it closed and placed it on the bedstand beside the dark hurricane lamp.

'Do you want me to help you undress?' she said.

He did not speak. He did not look at her, either. He moved his head from side to side, negatively.

'You'd be more comfortable.'

He only shook his head again. She shrugged. She bent over him and straightened his right leg. Holding it braced between her knees, she caught the boot and tugged, pulled and finally yanked it off. Something about the boot snagged at her attention, troubling her, but she could not give it any consideration at the moment.

She lifted his other boot, holding her hand under it. This was when she saw what had bothered her – the bootheel

was encrusted with red clay. More clay was caked inside the heel and across the instep.

Heart sinking, she worked the boot free, unable to pull her glance from the red clay dried on his bootheels.

'I'll take the boots down and let Jim polish them,' she said.

He did not answer. Chilled, her body rigid, she took the boots by their tops and crossed the room. She went out of the door into the shadowed hallway. She closed the door after her.

She walked to the window where the fading sunlight still streamed in through the lacy curtains. She held the left boot against her skirt. Sickness washed down through her. The clay crusted on Maston's bootheel perfectly matched the red smear of dirt on her dress.

IV

It was not Lizabeth's nature to surrender impulsively to panic. Since childhood she'd been determined, deliberate, stubborn and possessed of a raw courage that sometimes made her seem almost foolhardily obstinate, especially under stress.

She stood holding the clay-crusted boot, feeling fevered waves of anxiety, apprehension and dread washing down through her. Oh, the clay matched the red smear on her dress, all right, and Maston's boots were covered with the stuff. And he had thrown up *before* he drank too much at McGee's tavern downtown. Jim had said Maston had come home early and gone out at once. Still, though he'd been drunk only three times – three memorable times! – in the year and a half of their stormy marriage, his getting drunk was not in itself proof that he had discovered her in flagrante delicto with Tambura Beauchard. The clay was certainly damaging evidence, but red clay was indigenous to north Florida as well as Southern Georgia and Alabama. The soil could look the same without having come from that hidden hammock in the hills north of town.

There was still the slender chance it could all be coincidence. She didn't believe it was, but she had to be certain before she gave in to the alarms swarming in her mind. This was the crisis their marriage could not withstand – the fabled straw that broke the camel's back. She could not expect Maston to forgive her again or even to tolerate her in his home after this betrayal. She shuddered. Before she faced him again, she had to have irrefutable proof that it had been he watching her from the underbrush up there today.

She took up the boots, fighting back the debilitating sense of dread that threatened to incapacitate her. She had to keep moving before she was intimidated, shaken and her will paralyzed. She had to *do* something, she had to know the truth – no matter how damaging or ruinous that turned out to be.

Carrying the boots at her side, she went down the wide staircase. When she was only halfway down the steps, the doorbell rang. She shivered visibly and looked around in alarm. She hesitated and half-turned, wanting to run back upstairs, to hide in her room. She couldn't speak to anyone just now.

She remained unmoving. Tina, in her dark dress trimmed in white lace at collar and cuffs, came out of the dining room and opened the front door.

Lizabeth's heart sank and for a moment she was afraid she would be ill.

Immobile, she watched Jennifer Keyes waltz imperiously past the black servant girl into the foyer.

As always, Lizabeth found herself reinforced by her rage. Anger strengthened her resolve, it had forever. She concealed inner wrath, resentment, indignation or irritation very well indeed, but pushed too far, she could fly into a blind fury. This sort of animosity boiled and simmered inside her now.

Turning, Jennifer glanced up and found Lizabeth gazing coolly down upon her, apparently totally at ease, though dishevelled, with her hair loose about her pallid face and

tense shoulders. 'Oh, I can see I've come at a bad time – for you,' Jennifer said in her exaggeratedly sweet and genteel southern accent.

'Why, whenever else could I expect you, dear?' Elizabeth came slowly down the steps. She had the feeling there was the crackling tension of ruin and disaster in the very atmosphere. Else why was Jennifer Keyes here? They had barely spoken civilly for a long time. The old closeness of their childhood and teen years was gone forever. Of this Elizabeth was certain.

'Why, sweetheart, is that any way to talk – to your oldest – and dearest friend?' Jennifer laughed, enjoying herself. When Jennifer laughed she was undeniably radiantly beautiful. And no one was more aware of this than Jennifer herself.

Jennifer was nineteen, a fragile, porcelain-smooth girl, with red-golden hair and the faintest sprinkling of freckles across the dainty bridge of her shapely nose. Her pale tan eyes, shadowed by long, naturally upcurled lashes, were wide and limpid, her guileless smiling concealing long ugly strings of deceit, dissembling and subterfuge. She wore a smart, grey street suit with hobble skirt and a ruff of linen at her throat. Her widebrimmed matching hat was caught under her dimpled chin with a veil.

Elizabeth paused at the foot of the stairs, like a combatant. 'What do you want, Jennifer?'

Jennifer's eyes widened a little and she smiled, amused. 'You wearing boots now, love?'

Elizabeth placed the boots on the floor near the Newell post. She shrugged, pushing her hair back from her face. 'Why do I get the feeling that something fearful has happened here, or is just about to happen here?'

'I don't know whatever you're talking about.'

'Why are you here?'

'What a horrid thing to say. Haven't I always just dropped by – to say hello?'

'No. You haven't. Not for a long time.'

Tina remained standing at the door, entranced by the

tension crackling between the two young white women. The sound of the doorbell startled her. She quivered and had to get her own emotions under control before she could turn the knob.

She closed the door and turned, holding an envelope and a bouquet of damp, freshly cut long-stemmed roses of deep-red hue. She handed the note to Lizabeth.

'Looks as if I did arrive at the most opportune moment,' Jennifer said, tongue in cheek. 'An admirer, darling?'

Lizabeth ripped open the envelope upon which only her given name was written. She unfolded the sheet of notepaper and, heart sinking, saw it was from Tam.

She shrugged and managed to speak lightly. 'It's from Señor Beauchard.'

She had the secret pleasure of seeing Jennifer wince faintly, envious, before she could smile with the old urbanity. 'Well, he's certainly an admirer, all right. Few women around here he hasn't admired – from up close.'

Lizabeth glanced up from the note. She felt ill, but she was able to refold the sheet of paper and smile blandly at Jennifer. 'Was there some reason you dropped by like this, Jennifer?'

Jennifer caught her breath. 'Yes . . . I thought we were old friends. Very old friends. Maybe I'm mistaken.'

Lizabeth's violet-grey eyes brushed coldly across Jennifer's pale brown ones. 'Maybe you are.'

Jennifer straightened. 'I know we had a misunderstanding, Lizabeth. A slight misunderstanding. I didn't know you would allow it to destroy everything between us.'

'It looks like I would though, doesn't it?'

When Jennifer was gone, reluctantly and faintly aggrieved, Lizabeth sent Tina to put the roses in a vase. 'Give them to Carlotta,' she said. 'Tell her I want her to have them – in case I hurt her feelings earlier.'

Alone, she reopened Tam's letter and read it avidly.

My dear,

Good news. Our friend of this afternoon was not

Hampton Gates, anyhow. Ham was *most* previously engaged, all the p.m., believe me. He has the teeth prints to prove it!

I'm sure now that our intruder was nothing more than some passer-by. Probably as uncomfortable about it as we are.

I truly don't think we'll hear anymore about it. I look forward eagerly to seeing you again *soon* in even more secluded surroundings.

Love, Tam.

Her heart sinking, Lizabeth remained a long time in the foyer with the letter in her hand. Then she shredded the sheet of paper and balled it into a wad in her fist. She took up the boots and went along the shadowed corridor toward the kitchen.

Carlotta and Tina sat at the pinewood kitchen table. The deep-red roses showered from the ridged mouth of an earthenware vase. Carlotta looked up and smiled. 'Thank you for the flowers, Miz Lizabeth.'

Lizabeth nodded.

'Dinner gone to be spoiled we delay much longer, Miz Lizabeth,' Carlotta said.

Lizabeth shrugged, distracted. 'Serve it in here, Carlotta. To you, Tina and Jim. Doctor and I won't be having dinner tonight.'

'You shorely ought to eat something, Miz Lizabeth,' Carlotta said.

Lizabeth swung her arm impatiently. 'Not now. Maybe later.'

'I'll have Tina bring you up a nice platter.'

Lizabeth seemed not even to hear her. 'Where is Jim?'

'He out on the back porch,' Carlotta said. 'By the way, Miz Lizabeth. Your bathwater is hot – two nice kettles full.'

Lizabeth frowned, then shook her head. 'Let Tina take it up to my room. . . . Later. . . . After you've all had your dinner will be fine.'

She walked through the dark pantry to the twilight-lit screened porch where Jim Watkins sat in an aged

cane-bottomed rocking chair. He coaxed soft music from a mouth harp. He stopped playing his melancholy tune when he saw her and leaped up to his feet, bowing.

Lizabeth tried to smile. 'I'd like you to clean and polish Doctor's boots.' She drew a deep breath. 'Did he say where he'd been – except at the office today?'

Jim shook his head. 'No ma'm. He didn't say. His horse was purentee lathered when he come home. Figured maybe he'd rid far out in the country making a house call. . . . '

'Will you light me a lantern, please?' she said. 'I want to go out to the stables.'

Jim brought the lighted lantern. He wanted to accompany her, but she refused. 'Your dinner is ready, Jim, and I'm all right. I don't need you.'

She walked across the yard in a moving pool of yellow light. Darkness smoked in from the tall oaks and magnolias that stood in the lawn.

She entered the stable and closed the door behind her. Maston's saddle horse sagged, its head drooping, in its stall. Lizabeth set the lantern on the straw-littered ground and entered the stall. She found a metal scraper and knelt with it in her hand beside the horse.

She lifted the front paw. The doctor's horse had been washed and rubbed down, but the red clay remained caked deeply in its metal shoe. It stirred faintly as she scraped away clods of the red soil. The proof was no more positive than that she'd found on the doctor's boots, but she was convinced now. Maston had followed her and her lover into the secluded hills and the hidden glen.

She stood up and leaned against the bars of the stall. The horse shifted slightly and the light flickered dimly around her. Early evening silence settled over the stall, the barn, the town, the world, and she felt alone and forsaken in it. She had done a stupid thing, and she had been caught. But even as she admitted this and acknowledged her guilt, she did not see how she could have behaved differently because of what she was inside. None of this was what she'd started out wanting – clandestine love affair, a husband who

treated her coldly and even cruelly, a marriage doomed from the start though she'd vowed to give to it all her mind and heart and soul. Life didn't let you keep your promises or vows or dreams. All she wanted, all she had ever wanted, was to be loved deeply and to return that love with all the fire and heat and passion within her. But nothing was as she'd wanted it. Nothing. The guilt was hers, and hers alone, but only because she was as God Himself had made her, with unquenchable thirsts and needs and desires, with appetites and dreams that became disappointments and dissatisfaction and emptiness and longing – and despair.

She looked about, forlorn. She didn't know what she was going to do. As she stood there, this was all she could think. 'What's going to happen to me? What am I going to do?'

She turned down the wick, blew out the fire in the lantern and went on standing there in the silent stable in the obscuring darkness.

PART TWO

1865 THE DAUGHTER

Lizabeth Hayward was the first person Maston Devereau discovered, remarked and remembered when he set up practice in Tallahassee. She attracted, excited and arrested his attention as no one else had in three years. When he described her, inquired about her, and admitted how impressed he was by her delicate blonde beauty, townspeople nodded and gave him a faint, knowing smile which hinted that no matter what they answered, they left a great deal unspoken.

These fleeting smiles annoyed him and intensified his interest in the beautiful girl, but when he pressed the subject, the smiles only widened. His acquaintances would shrug, smile, and say no more.

He abruptly stopped questioning. He saw the town for what it was – a bigoted, hidebound, narrow-minded little Bible-belt hamlet. Since this was precisely the sort of community in which he'd grown up and certainly was reminiscent of every other province he'd visited south of the Mason-Dixon, he felt he could cope as he always had with opinionated morality. And because he'd chosen this site for his new start in life, he accepted these dogmatic views as something he was fated to live with. It was extremely unlikely that he'd find any realm very different in its cherished religious and moral convictions or stiff-necked standards of conduct east of New Orleans. Intolerance of weakness in others was the normal pattern of existence here, so ingrained by now that inflexible restraints were perceived only as reasonable rectitude, if they were questioned at all.

By the time Maston arrived in Tallahassee in early March, 1865, the state capitol was already an aged town well past forty years old. It was a wealthy settlement, a centre for trade in lumber, cotton, cattle, agricultural products, naval stores, resins – and politics.

The business district was confined to two paved streets which followed a ridge northward from Capitol Square. Its

cross streets, shaded by oaks and magnolias, sloped off into residential districts of old homes, mansions with spacious lawns, some of which dated back to territorial days, and tall-steepled brick and frame churches that once sheltered citizens during Indian raids. Red clay streets intersected the few brick-paved thoroughfares and traffic was heavy with horse and mule-drawn vehicles. Basking in the sun along the high downtown curbs were shining coaches and fine carriages with liveried coachmen beside rickety flatbeds, carry-alls from surrounding farms. Hitching posts and watering troughs were permanent, artistic and fashionable. Oats and baled hay, along with leather goods, harness and supplies, were in heavy demand and purveyed on almost every block. Its established society remained rigid and unchanging since long before the war.

He found the town promising for a medical practice, with one of the two colleges established by the state legislature, with year-round commerce and extraordinary influx of people at the convening of the state legislature. During this sixty-day period, the city was centre for politicians, city, county and state officials, newspaper people, lobbyists and special interest groups. Development of trade with Cuba had begun with the end of the British occupation of the territory in the eighteenth century and had continued, if haphazardly, during the war between the states. For two blocks in the shadow of the Capitol dome, Adams Street was noisy, crowded and chaotic on Saturdays when rural families drove in to do their weekly shopping. Store windows were plastered with hand-lettered signs, banners advertising bargain sales and especially lowered week-end prices, though actually all costs were religiously marked-up every Friday night.

Established in 1822, the town became the core of a society manifest in every other southern parish. Ralph Waldo Emerson had visited the city in 1827 and he wrote in his journal: 'Tallahassee is a grotesque place . . . rapidly settled by public officers, land speculators and desperadoes. . . . Governor Duval is the button on which

all things are hung.'

The Capitol city progressed industrially and culturally until the Civil War abruptly halted all forward momentum. A centre of cotton marketing, it boasted one of the first railroads in the entire nation. The Tallahassee-St Marks Railroad, built in 1834, was operated by mule-power during its first years.

Maston came to the hill town in response to an advertisement he'd happened upon accidentally in a Virginia medical publication. The notice stated that only two physicians remained in the area – both in their early sixties and beyond the age for making sustained house calls in outlying districts. All younger medics in the region had been conscripted for service in the Confederate Medical Corps.

He had not answered the prospectus; he had merely shown up one day in a lightweight buggy, packed with three cheap suitcases, one of which belonged to the black servant who sat on the boot beside him.

'How does it look to you, Jim?' he'd asked.

His body servant had shrugged, but said nothing.

Maston found the town promising and unusual, unlike most he had seen on his way south. Thanks to fierce resistance by young boys, over-aged or battle-wounded males, infuriated women and home militia, the Capitol was one of the few cities of the Confederacy which the invaders had not been able either to capture, sack or subdue. It remained, essentially untouched, a serenely beautiful old settlement, proud, unscarred and more reactionary even than conservative. It was a society in which family name, position and power was of utmost importance in the old established structure of business, politics and social relations.

Tallahassee didn't welcome strangers warmly, unless its citizenry found in the amenity the promise of profit ...

From the windows of his second-floor walk-up office in the red-brick English-Westcott Building on downtown Adams

Street, Maston could see most of the city. The sun gleamed golden on the Capitol dome. Men gathered and loitered in the town square. Trains arrived and pulled away from the depot. Park Avenue divided the place north and south, its parkway planted with live oaks. Like some sombre dowager the beautiful old mansion called the Columns, red brick, with vine-covered chimneys rising out of the gables, haughtily monitored every movement along Park and Adams. Its columned entrance and deep-set windows whispered of grace and charm and nostalgia, one of the oldest homes in the area. Somebody told him the builder had embedded a nickel in every construction brick used in the chateau. He could see the old Presbyterian church, the roofs of the state college and in the distance the shakes of the governor's mansion. For a long time he saw few patients.

His practice suddenly accelerated when aged Doctor Leland Stark refused to make an after-midnight house call and caustically referred his patient to the 'new young fellow who'd be willing to make house calls on hogs just to get eating money'.

Law and medicine are two of the three professions most nourished and enriched by word of mouth. After that first late-night house call, Dr Devereau's waiting room was soon the busiest reception area in town. People sent for him at all hours and hung out lanterns to mark their homes for him in the solitary black hours before dawn. They accepted him warily, found him unfailingly warm, reassuring, far more than competent, an incredibly able surgeon despite his comparative youth. He was uncomplaining and was willing to accept barter in trade for his services. He was young, handsome, faintly sombre with a hidden sadness deep in his grey eyes. But they were eyes that smiled easily; his bedside manner was impeccable; he seemed alert to the latest medical developments; his voice was gentle, calm, mildly teasing. His patients fell in love with him.

They were insatiably curious about him. He was a stranger in town and nobody knew anything about him;

they couldn't amass a penny's worth of fact. Who was he? Who were his folks? Where was he from? Why had he chosen Tallahassee for his practice? And – most especially – why was his Tulane University Medical Degree practically illegible? Why could only his given name be clearly deciphered while his surname was almost obliterated?

Of all the questions, he answered only the last with any sort of satisfactory explanation. His sheepskin had been hidden, along with other family valuables, from invading forces. But obviously it had not been concealed well enough. He had retrieved and framed what remained. And where had this happened? Up home, he would say, dismissing the whole subject as if this cleared up the entire matter. 'What do you care?' he would ask, smiling. 'As long as I can cure your children's measles and chicken pox, and can even tell the difference – at the same price?'

The first time Maston saw Elizabeth Hayward he had no idea, of course, what her name was, only that she was lovely, enchanting, unforgettable. She wore a white dress of Swiss batiste, with throat-choker collar of antique lace, a voluminous skirt that danced and flounced and undulated when she walked and which was caught at her seventeen-inch waist with a pale gold sash that somehow precisely matched her hair under a floppy-brimmed picture hat. She and another beauty came out of a ladies shop as he passed on Adams Street. The sun highlighted them, played on them and sparkled around them. The girl with her said something and she tilted her head with a laugh that dazzled him at forty feet. Such beautiful eyes, pale and glittering with inner laughter and flecks of captured sunlight. He could not get her out of his mind.

During the next weeks he began to look for her whenever he left his Adams Street office, or the boarding house room he shared with his manservant. She wafted radiant across his mind in the dark nights. He found her image far more pleasant than the spectres from the past which lately

haunted his sweated, waking hours before dawn. He had from his arrival looked forward to late-night house-calls; they were far better than lying sleepless, harried by persisting and hurting memories. Now he conjured up that lovely face in the malevolent darkness and, with it, obliterated and erased all other lovely faces from the past. The past was dead and buried, over, finished. If he had any life at all, it was here, in this place, and the grey-eyed blonde with her fascinating smile was the consolatory manna in this wilderness.

Whenever he found her, she was always in the company of her radiant, red-haired friend; they appeared inseparable. They adorned the old town like two exotic flowers entwined on the same vine. He quickly learned that he was not alone in admiring and monitoring those two lovelies. The whole town watched them narrowly, even more closely than he did, and often with disapproving gazes. For one thing, few ladies ever appeared in the downtown shopping area unaccompanied by males, but these two flittered everywhere unattended, uncaring and unabashed. If there were rules of conduct, such laws must apply to other lesser beings, declared the happy smiles of these two free-spirited creatures. They scandalized the town, and they revelled in it.

He learned her name, but it looked as if he might not meet her at all. She was entrenched behind the protective barricades of the establishment, and he was new in town, a stranger without social connections. She was the daughter of a state supreme court justice named Van Elliott Hayward. The Van Elliotts and the Haywards were two of the region's oldest families; they were not wealthy, but were certainly socially secure if not prominent. He learned that Van Hayward was a mediocre, pedestrian judge who ruled always as advised, directed and sometimes even commanded by the political superstructure. He was honest about it. He believed firmly in the unquestionable rightness of the structure position. He believed with all his rigid, closed mind in equality before the law; he defended the

idea, often addressed men's clubs on the subject. It was the litigants who were less than equal and this was not the fault of the system. In his eyes it was merely standard procedure that the benefits of judicial ruling should rebound to the party of responsibility, that appellant with political support, financial strength and establishment approval. This was not to him in the least unfair, or even remarkable. It was simply a fact of life. It was a tenet by which he lived, a slender, retiring, totally conservative man.

As proof of Judge Hayward's unswerving loyalty to establishment mores was the fact that he'd opposed secession from the Union, but after the legislature voted for it and it was an accomplished fact, the judge had kept his mouth shut about it. He was far less than a brilliant jurist, but he could remain unchallenged on the high bench until retirement or death removed him. He would tell you with a faint smile that the most sensational thing in his life was the beauty, vivacity and stunning popularity of his only daughter. Lizabeth was as unlike her father as any offspring ever can be.

But to Maston, the important consideration was that Lizabeth Hayward seemed beyond his reach simply because they moved on different tides in the same social swirl. They never met; she attended a hundred parties; he went when he was rarely invited, but she was never a guest at the same soiree. He began to hope that some minor distress – a hangnail perhaps – might bring her to his office as patient. This didn't happen either. She was entirely too healthy either to come near him or to summon him on hurried emergency housecall.

Then he found out where she lived – a gabled house set down in a manicured lawn just off Park Avenue in the most elite region of town. It was not the most accessible of avenues, and yet Dr Devereau found he was driving past her home, mornings, afternoons, evenings and in the darkest hours of night, on every housecall, no matter if his emergency lay in three other directions. He truly felt like a callow smitten calf, like a first-love veteran in convales-

cence. He did not care. He wasn't getting a great deal of satisfaction or contentment out of his life at present, and in riding past her home on all his errands he was at least doing what he wanted to do.

Sometimes it was quite dark when he drove past. He would find, frequently, a carriage pulled into the deepest shadows of the driveway, with faintly illumined house windows spilling light in faded stains over the grass and gravel and hedges. Sometimes laughter, erupting from the darkness of the coach would claw out at him, and follow him along the night street and leave him empty-bellied with a strange sense of dissatisfaction.

In the mornings, the old house reposed in late slumber, curtains, shades and blinds drawn in upstairs windows that he told himself belonged to her, to the judge's daughter. Fragile silence hung over the place as if waiting for someone with the courage to shatter it. Beauty naps were extended. Sometimes, returning past noon, he'd find those curtains, shades and blinds still tautly drawn.

The home came to life in the early afternoon. Often, after three, he might glimpse the judge's lady – Lizabeth's mother – seated on the shadowed veranda, sometimes alone, sometimes sharing tea with elegant ladies in large hats, white gloves and becoming chiffon veils loose about their necks.

Mrs Hayward was a sallow, frail-looking little woman, always trimly attired and proper, often fanning herself with a small taffetine fan. He saw her look up and watch him pass, and one afternoon he tipped his hat to her politely as he drove by. The second time he did it, she nodded, a little stiffly, and almost smiled.

One afternoon a quite regal and elegant looking woman entered his reception room. She was beautifully attired in a street suit, with veil and gloves. A tall woman, she seemed to carry with her the sharp recall of an enchanting beauty. She introduced herself. 'I am Mrs Kyle Monroe Keyes,' she said.

When Maston invited her into his consultation room, she

stiffened visibly and explained she was not a patient; in fact, the pained expression on her patrician face seemed to reject the entire notion as inappropriate and impossible. He shrugged. He was well aware there were establishment people in town who would continue to patronize Dr Leland Stark until they died of neglect, incompetence or ineptitude. 'I've come on a purely social matter, Dr Devereau. We ladies of the DAR are sponsoring a charity ball to benefit war orphans. I cannot myself imagine a more worthy cause. The governor himself has kindly consented to open the ballroom of his mansion for the affair. We would like for you to come. We want to welcome you to our midst. This will provide an opportunity for you to become acquainted with all of our very best families. From it should come great good for a young man in your position. Tickets are one hundred dollars. But you have the satisfaction of knowing that every cent will go to help starving and homeless children left in the wake of Sherman's bloody and mindless invasion. I cannot, as I say, think of a more worthy cause. And, too, you would meet only the very best people.'

Maston grinned. 'They would have to be, wouldn't they, at a hundred dollars a head?'

That afternoon, in passing the Hayward home, he nodded and tipped his hat to Mrs Judge Hayward, alone on her veranda. The good lady smiled, nodded her head and, after a moment of hesitation, fluttered her kerchief at him in a brief wave.

A housecall four miles south of town delayed Dr Devereau's arrival at the Governor's mansion on Brevard and Adams Streets. A farmhand almost severed his own leg with a dull scythe; the bone in his calf was shattered.

The young medic repaired the bone, reset it and placed the leg in a cast so dextrously that the farm-people stood around and watched in gape-mouthed awe. 'Never seed nobody that expert,' the farmer said, shaking his head.

Maston shrugged. 'Had a lot of practise.'

'You was in the army, was you? I figgered that.'

Maston only smiled. He did not answer, busying himself washing up. The farmer paid in produce and live chickens.

It was almost ten o'clock before Maston got to the charity affair at the governor's mansion. The remodelled old home in a grove of live oaks, pines and magnolias glowed with lights upstairs and down as Maston drove his buggy along the crowded, winding gravel driveway. The place glittered brilliantly with lights and reverberated with spirited music of a string orchestra. But the occasion resembled an Irish wake far more than a society gala.

He was surprised to find the attendance as large as it was. For a long time now, the Confederacy had been bankrupt, its specie worthless, its credit gone, within its own boundaries and beyond the seas, even if it could have run the Federal blockade to get that help. A joint military and naval expedition had sacked Fort Fisher, effectively sealing off the last Confederate port to international trade, aid or commerce. The war was not yet over – at least the generals had not surrendered. Grant had assaulted Lee at Petersburg and Richmond, forcing Lee to withdraw west to Lynchburg. Kirby-Smith somehow still held out in the trans-Mississippi area. Sherman was trampling down General Hardee's tattered armies and burning his way north from Savannah, as he had scorched the land coming east, and he was finding no further opposition to his torch in the Carolinas. The charred land was in the deepest pit beyond hell, but at least Tallahassee was out of the reach and roar of Federal guns. Life was more nearly normal in north Florida than almost anywhere else in the beleaguered and defeated rebel states. Whatever money changed hands in Florida these days was either Federal dollars, gold, silver, or state-issued script and specie.

Maston crossed the wide, brightly illuminated veranda where a few groups of older and middle-aged men gathered with their cigars and tumblers of corn whiskey. He surrendered his ticket at the open doorway and crossed the polished foyer to the ballroom. This luxurious and spacious hall was crowded and there was music and laughter, but

over it all hung a feeling of oppression, as if they poised, refusing to look, on the brink of doom. God knew this was true enough. Dozens of young men were present – few of them whole any more. Some had lost a leg, an eye, a hand, or carried shell fragments, unseen but obvious. Many dress-suit sleeves were empty, turned up and pinned, almost like a badge of honour.

Maston shuddered seeing these relics of the 'glorious' war, standing like ghosts at the banquet. Horror flooded back through him. For a long beat he stood unmoving, almost impelled to heel around and run out of the place.

The music stopped with a flourish and the dancers moved off the floor, women in their tired best, men in dress suits that shone with tell-tale age or were faintly redolent of moth-balls and chemical solvents.

Governor Milton stepped out before the orchestra dais and raised his hands above his head, waiting until a murmuring sort of silence settled over the crowds along the walls and seated in the tall, open windows. This ball was unusual in many ways – there were no dance cards for the ladies to carry and have filled for the evening. The rigid rules forbidding any gentleman from approaching a lady to whom he had not been formally introduced were, for this occasion, suspended. A man could dance with any lady of his choice, if he bid for her and was successful. Each set of dance tunes required that men bid for the ladies' company. The table beside the governor was piled and stacked and somehow sadly spangled with the few remaining ornaments from the elegant past – brass candlesticks, gold rings, plates, jewellery, epaulets, locketts, bracelets, chains, gems, anything of value. A large bowl held Federal dollars, some silver and a few gold pieces, but it was not very full.

Maston found Lizabeth Hayward near a potted palm, far across the room. All the candles and all the lamps seemed to beam their glow upon her. She sat fanning herself with a fragile lace kerchief, her lovely face flushed. Obviously, she had not so far missed a dance. Like some gossamer sprite, in off-shoulder chiffon that somehow looked fresh, and

even fashionable, she had wafted radiant around and around this bright arena to the quickened tempo of heartbeats like snare drums in adoring young chests.

The belle of this ball sat with her mother, with the formidable Mrs Keyes and with the incredibly lovely Jennifer, along with a couple of young dandies Maston had never seen before.

'Who'll start the bidding for the next ensemble – a trot, a reel and a waltz – all for the price of one?' the Governor called. 'I know we've all dug deep here tonight – I can see proof on this table of how deeply we all have reached. Deep, deep into our hearts. But – for this cause – any sacrifice is worth it. Have we anything left to bid? The evening is young. The hour early. We can afford to turn this ball back to a request dance. *We* can afford to. I'm sure we'd like to. But those starving and homeless orphan children in Georgia – and now more of them every day in the Carolinas – desolated and abandoned in Sherman's fiery path – they can't afford for us to enjoy ourselves – without paying – and paying dearly – for it. . . . Come . . . bid . . . gentlemen, please . . . bid. Anything at all.'

Maston peered at the lovely goddess across the room. He drew a deep breath and, from the centre of the French doorway at the foyer, called across the dance floor, 'I'll bid – a crate of six chickens, three laying hens and three fryers, a box of various spring produce, including several pounds of potatoes and carrots, and one side of ham.'

A moment of stunned silence struck across the room. Even the undercurrent of murmuring subsided. People looked up, catching their breath. Gradually, they recognized the 'new' doctor. The realization struck them that this was his main income – almost everybody paid the doctor in barter.

'It's the doctor.'

'It's young Dr Devereau.'

'Barter. His barter. Isn't that clever?'

Laughter rippled and then roared across the room, the governor joining in and waving for silence.

'That's quite an acceptable bid, Dr Devereau. And we appreciate it. Would you name the young lady with whom you'd like to dance? If the bid is acceptable to her, we are quite happy and content.'

Maston took another step forward and drew a second and deeper breath. He was reaching that moment toward which he had headed since the first time he glimpsed Lizabeth Hayward; he was about to meet her.

'My bid is for Miss Lizabeth Hayward, sir,' Maston said.

All eyes moved from him to the beautiful blonde girl far across the room. Before she could react, move or form any reply, one of the young men standing behind her chair shouted in protest. 'This is an insulting bid, Governor. An insult to this young lady. I'll bid fifty dollars in script for the honour of this dance with Miss Hayward.'

But Lizabeth was on her feet now. The strange bid was precisely in keeping with her finely honed sense of the oddly and bizarrely dramatic.

She danced close against him.

'Are you trying to destroy your social life here in this town before it even hatches?' she asked, her lovely head back, her violet-soft eyes gently reflecting all the lights in the place.

'I'm truly not very worried about it. But what faux pas have I so unwittingly committed?'

'Don't you know why you were invited here tonight?'

'So the DAR could get my one hundred dollars?'

'Don't you know who invited you?'

'Certainly. A Mrs Keyes.'

'Very good.' They danced smoothly together; he supposed she made every man look good on a dance floor; he felt her full breasts pressed against him and he could think of nothing else. 'And that Mrs Keyes,' she persisted, 'has an eligible, marriageable daughter. Almost eighteen. For her there can be only the suitable, ideal marriage - '

'An old family name and a lot of new Federal money.'

'Right. You're smarter than you look after all.' Her laughter teased him. 'You were invited here, my dear man,

to be checked over for defects or faults or lacks by Mrs Keyes and her daughter.'

'Yes. But I came for only one reason – to dance with you.'

She put her lovely blonde head back, laughing at him. He was aware that everyone in the room watched them. He was also aware that they were very handsome together and that some of the gazes fixed on them were envious, agitated and some even were sad. He barely heard the poignant tunes played by the orchestra of violins, violas and piano. He felt his heart pound, as if racing with the music, marking off this brief and precious time he had with her. Now her laugh was honest and abruptly she was actually looking at him, as if she had not even really seen him before. 'Yes,' she said. 'But you don't have the faintest grasp of how these things work.'

'I know what I want.'

'How naive.' Her smile taunted him gently. 'A mere man. Knows what he wants. How could he know unless some woman told him? And anyhow, what could be less important in the big scheme of things? Don't you see, you poor foolish man? It's been decided. All been decided. You're available. Attractive. With potential. You're young. Extremely handsome, but of course you could outgrow that and settle down to be a suitable husband. You're a medicine man. With a promising career. Why, my own mother started all this! She told Mrs Keyes herself how many housecalls you make – out past our house. The very best section of town.'

He grinned. 'Of course. That's where I get all the shoats, corn and baking hens for my services.'

'So anyhow, the ladies have determined that you appear quite eligible. . . . Of course, everything's tentative, you understand.'

'Oh, of course.'

'There's still the third degree. Where you came from. Who your family *was*. That's far more important than who they *are*. Old blood. Even old tired blood. That's so important, I do hope you have some. And, of course, how

much money you have.'

He smiled down at her, enchanted. 'You saw how I bid you in.'

She shrugged, her fingers tightening secretively, insinuatingly upon his arm. 'Well, times are bad just now. Your present net worth is not the most urgent consideration . . . Mrs Keyes decreed that Jennifer could sort of – look you over, on approval, that sort of thing. All very circumspect, and chaperoned, and proper –'

'Well, I should hope so –'

'I can see you're not taking this nearly seriously enough. And by bidding for me – instead of Jennifer – I can tell you, you've gone and spoiled everything for yourself.'

'I'll kill myself. Right after this dance.'

'At the least you may have to set up practice in some other town.'

He sighed in mock despair. 'Exiled. In disgrace.'

'All buttons and sabres and epaulets ripped off –'

'Well,' his arms tightened on her, 'I may as well enjoy myself while I can . . . Tell me, what would I have to bid in order to get the next dance with you?'

'Why don't you try to think of something?'

He had known at first sight that Lizabeth Hayward was blondely and fragilely beautiful. To his surprise, Maston found that the time he was permitted to spend in Lizabeth's company were the most fabulous hours of enchantment imaginable. She was not what he'd expected at all – not a silly blonde, flighty, frenetic, foolish. Instead, she was calm, cool, smiling, and remote. It was only when she came lightly into his arms that the ice melted into fire, the passions flared, sometimes almost out of control. She had the unsettling way of making a man feel that while he might not be the first one she'd kissed, he was rather, the only one who mattered. For the lonely, the solitary, the stranger cut off from home, this was romantic, attractive and sweetly painful.

The better one came to know her, the more certain he

was that he would never truly know her at all. There was a subtle aura of mystery and aloofness about her. When you expected her to cry, she laughed. When you reached for her, she pushed you away. When you gave up in despair, she ran after you, laughing. When you expected to find her cool and detached, she wept painfully, like a little girl. She seemed totally without any self-doubt. She was without pretensions. Her very naturalness was one of her most endearing qualities. There was a stirring, captivating lustre about her. One walked around empty-bellied with longing when away from her. Maston found he was even fascinated by the particular gold of her golden hair.

When several days passed, slowly, one after another without her in them, he was hollow-hearted, empty and lonely. Always a sudden sense of desolation oozed down through him when she was not near. He found himself worrying about what she was doing, whom she was seeing, when he was away from her. He was truly shocked to find he cared so much.

When they were together, time raced past. She introduced him to her favourite picnic spots. They attended concerts in the soft evenings. She loved lonely walks along country lanes under the stars. On moonlight swims, picnics in secluded glens, there were always others with them, but he was aware only of her.

Sometimes they just walked together downtown, loitering through the balmy, fragrant twilight. They sat together on her dark veranda, curtained with vines and intoxicating with the smell of jasmine and honeysuckle and high-hung magnolias.

He lived in a kind of uncomfortable discontent. No matter how devoutly she promised an evening would be his alone, there were always dozens of interruptions, dates she'd forgotten she'd made, or forgotten to cancel, or simply forgotten, sometimes angry young men who felt themselves slighted and insulted, ready to vent their pent-up violences on the nearest male since the heat of their rage simply deepened her unflagging coolness, made

her more remote, curiously silent and still. But even on their best evenings, he left her home and walked through the shadowed night trailed by her haunting perfume, the soft scent of shrub blossoms and a heavy feeling of restlessness.

One afternoon she abruptly sent word to his office by her maid that their date for that evening was off. She offered no explanation. The frightened black girl only repeated, 'She didn't say, Masta. She didn't say.'

He tried to be civilized, understanding and urbane about it. After all, it wasn't the end of the world, it only seemed like it. But the night around him was hot and suffocating and empty. The urbanity sweated off before eight. By nine he stood on her veranda, his finger hard upon her doorbell.

She answered the door herself. She stood in the saffron light of the doorway. She seemed somehow smaller, wan and lost, and he was struck by the pale yellow of her hair, the look of fever about her flushed cheeks, the fire of panic flaming in her eyes.

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't see you any more.'

'Are you crazy?'

She met his eyes coldly. 'I may be. But I mean it.'

He stared at her, puzzled and confused. She seemed so frail and fragile, and yet strangely flint-hard at the same time. She was like a pale Easter lily, no more substantial, her face turned up to his, defiant, and in panic. She seemed capable of any resolve, determined, strong-willed, inflexible. She seemed capable of any cruelty, and yet in the same instant she looked lost, on the brink of hysteria, in helpless despair.

He reached out to touch her, but she withdrew, trembling. Her clear and violet eyes looked around in that unexplained panic. He had seen that same harried look of horror on the faces of wounded men, fresh and bleeding from battle. Just how she had lost some private war of her own, what kind of pitched battle she'd waged and lost, he

didn't know. Her agony, her ill-restrained restlessness, her mood of grief, was her only admission of defeat.

'Do you mind saying why?'

She spread her hands. 'Yes . . . I do . . . No. I don't. A good friend of mine – you wouldn't know her name – announced her engagement today. To a man I know. The man who is marrying her – you wouldn't know his name. God, how lucky you are. The people you don't know. Anyway, he told me he was marrying Prudence – her name is Prudence – because he was the only man Prudence had ever kissed . . . Well, it was all I could do to keep from falling on the floor and howling with laughter . . . Oh God . . . Only man she kissed. . . . Why the last year at finishing school . . . '

She broke off suddenly and shook her head. Her hands were taut fists at her side.

'Sit on the veranda with me,' Maston said. 'Please. For a little while.'

'No. I can't . . . I won't.'

'Please, Lizabeth.'

Reluctantly, she accompanied him to a dark bower of honeysuckle vines. They stood side by side in a rectangle of lamplight, their shadows sprawled lean across the grass before them. He put his arms around her and drew her to him. He wanted her desperately.

She turned her face away. 'Why don't you be a smart young doctor and go on home?'

'I want to kiss you.'

She shook her head.

'Why not?'

'I can't . . . I've kissed too many men . . . I'm used merchandise . . . Kissing men only gets me in trouble . . . I don't need any more trouble.'

'My God. Do you think I'd ever say anything?'

'All men talk – they're worse than old women . . . '

'But I love you. Lizabeth.'

She stiffened in his embrace. 'I do hope you don't think this is the first time I've heard those honeyed words – in the

dark. I don't hear the slander – until the next day –'

'What's the matter, Lizabeth? Something's made you awfully bitter.'

'I'm just tired. Tired pretending. Tired lying. Tired kissing strangers like this. Tired saying I care when I don't care at all –'

'My God –'

'I'm sorry, Maston . . . It's not your fault . . . Let's say you came along too late. Or at the wrong time . . . I'm just through with all this.'

'All what, for God's sake?'

'This. Fondling and caressing and kissing in the dark.'

'Even if I love you?'

'Especially if you love me. If you say you love me.'

'Damn it, I do love you . . . As much as I can love anyone . . . I do love you.' He held her closer. 'I'm not trying to sell you a bill of goods. Or even to be original . . . I want to marry you.'

She shivered and drew away from him. 'Marry me?'

'Yes.' He was as astonished to hear himself say it as she was. It was just that here, in this place, at this moment, there were no other words.

'Marry me? Well, my God, Doctor. Why didn't you say so?'

She came close to him and they clung together, braced upon the balustrade and illuminated against the dark shadows of the gardenia hedge, the lawn and the tip of a quarter-moon beyond the jagged crown of trees.

She laughed emptily. Something was happening to her. She was going to do something she'd never done before; she was going to get married. She put her head back laughing, but clinging to him, outlining her body hard upon his. She suddenly felt young, renewed, excited, exalted and hopeful, along with her panic.

He kissed her. 'Do you love me?'

'I will.' Her whisper was fervent. 'Oh, I will. I will. I will. I vow I will.'

Judge Hayward's library was a large, sombre room with six-foot, mahogany bookshelves against the panelled walls. The deep, plush and upholstered chairs were covered in calf leather. Over his desk hung a very sedate and idealized portrait of the jurist in his robes. The desk was cluttered with books, mementoes, small statuettes in marble and porcelain, pens, holders, figurines and stacks of blue-jacketed appeals, litigations, pleadings, demurrers, actions which had worked their tortuous way upward through the state's judiciary.

Judge Hayward was a small, slender man, bearing only faint resemblance to the imposing jurist in the huge framed portrait. His wispy hair was grey, his face soft and pink. His features were finely hewn, his mouth thin-lipped under a clipped salt-and-pepper moustache. He was by nature an arrogant and overweening man, vain and aloof. But about the judge there was a new appearance of harried inner bitterness and self-recrimination in conflict with the natural self-esteem which had been intensified by years of being held above all men and most gods on a hallowed bench of the state supreme court.

Something hurtful and destructive had unsettled the judge recently, perhaps almost unmanning him. Maston had no way of knowing what had happened, only that it had practically destroyed the man in his own eyes, though he went on behaving as usual outwardly. Whatever it was, the moment and the pain had passed. Scars remained in his heart and anguish darkened his sun-faded eyes, and his slender shoulders sagged in a strangely pathetic way, but his damaged ego had regained enough balance to allow him to settle back into his niche in society, in the town, on the bench, the hurt and the diminished self-regard hidden behind a polite mask of disinterested courtesy. He lived now in an unhappy compromise with the daily demands of life and he performed adequately, if one didn't probe too deeply and peer too closely. And sometimes this is all we can ask of ourselves.

Judge Hayward stood up from the plush, upholstered

judge's chair behind his polished desk when Maston entered his den. Maston could see in the aging man's warmly cordial manner that the Hayward women had prepared the judge for this interview, may well have advised him of what he could and could not be expected to say.

They shook hands and Judge Hayward offered Maston a drink. Maston shook his head. 'I drink only for exhilarating effects, Judge. I don't like the taste of any of it and I'm happy enough right now. I don't need spirits. Tell you what. If you turn me down, maybe I'll take that drink.'

Judge Hayward smiled and gestured toward a club chair, inviting Maston to sit down. 'Turn you down, my boy?'

'I'd like to marry your daughter, sir,' Maston said. 'I love her very much. I realize I haven't known her very long – but on the other hand, she says she loves me – or could learn to – and she hasn't known me very long, either. All I can say is, I would try to make her happy – and someday even offer her the kind of life she's accustomed to here.'

Judge Hayward smiled. 'Presenting all your evidence in an opening statement, are you?'

Maston nodded. 'When a surgeon operates, Judge, he has to deliver all of his best from the moment the incision is made.'

Judge Hayward laughed. 'Are we discussing forensic medicine here, or do I understand you wish to marry my Elizabeth?'

'Despite my best efforts to be clear, sir, you understood my meaning exactly . . . I realize you know little about me. And there's not too much I can tell you. I am a graduate of Tulane Medical School. I served for a while with the medical corps of the Confederate Army. I've set up practice here. I hope to make this my home. As a matter of fact, I'm buying the old Curtis Meares place –'

'I know the old home. I knew the Meares family well. It was an elegant old home in its day – with acres of land around it.'

'It is in some disrepair at the moment. I hope I can

restore it – and even modernize it.’ Maston gestured. ‘I’m buying it only for Lizabeth. If she doesn’t marry me, I don’t know what I’ll do with that huge old place.’

‘Before we go any further, my boy, there’s something I’d like to say. Something I think I ought to say.’ The slight little man shifted uncomfortably in the high-backed judge’s chair.

Maston smiled. ‘Anything at all, Judge.’

The Judge sighed. ‘It’s nothing I was instructed to say. Perhaps not even anything I’d be wanted to say . . . but to me it is important.’

‘I’d like to hear it, sir.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it’s just that I’m old fashioned. You don’t have to tell me the world is passing me by. My God, I see proof of that every day. I look back with some longing for the mores and standards of – of my day. It has to do with how briefly you and my daughter have known each other.’

‘I understand you might object to this, sir.’

‘It’s not an objection so much. The world moves faster now. The war has made a difference. In my day a couple engaged for a year was the norm. You know? They came to know each other before they married . . . In that there has been a change, with all these war-time marriages, standards have altered. It’s just that one thing has not changed – and that is that both parties to a marriage are expected to be prepared for lifelong commitment. It’s eternal – lifetime, with no turning back. Especially for a woman. Divorce is unthinkable. Unconscionable. A divorced woman – even in our fast-moving new world – is well, a marked and tarnished woman. When a woman marries, even in today’s changing society, she sets out on a journey from which there is no turning back – no escape, except in death. I just want you to see that the male partner in such an inviolable contract has certain unbreakable responsibilities and obligations. I want you to see that.’

‘I don’t enter this lightly or irresponsibly, Judge.’

‘I’m sure you don’t.’ The Judge smiled and nodded. But

even in his smiling there resided that faint and sombre reserve. There seemed to be much he still left unsaid. He assented in that chilled-yet-jovial tone. 'If my daughter loves you, Doctor, I won't stand in your way. . . .' He extended his hand. 'Welcome to our family, my boy. I hope you will be happy. I do hope you will. . . .'

Maston was too excited to sleep. He walked past his boarding house in the soft glow of late evening. It seemed to him the air had never been so balmy, so pleasant. It was exalting just to be alive – to look forward to living again. He could almost forget the evil, the ugliness, the torment that had driven him here. He sighed expansively. He was embarking on a new life – and he was not going to be alone any more.

Piano music, loud and low down, the kind the Negroes loved over in the French town section, gushed, along with cigar smoke, the damp smell of beer, and gaudy lamplight, from the Senate Chambers. Maston entered the crowded saloon. He greeted the few people he knew and sat alone at a table.

McGee came over, bringing a mug of beer. 'On the house, Doc.' The bar owner smiled. 'By the way, Margie-Ann is fine. She's just fine. Thanks to you.'

Maston grinned. 'Sometimes children make a doctor look good, Walter-Tom. Give them and nature time and they get well – despite all a doctor can do – and the medic always gets all the credit.'

'You sat up all night with her.'

Maston shrugged. 'Couldn't sleep anyway.'

'Old Doc Claude Lintner wouldn't have done it.'

'Maybe he's smarter than I am.'

McGee shook his head. 'We're glad you came to this town, Doc. . . . Lot of folks saying that.'

'Guess I'll be staying. . . . I asked Miss Lizabeth Hayward to marry me tonight.'

'Oh.'

'Don't let your delight get you hysterical, Walter-Tom.'

'Oh, no. No. . . . I hope you'll be happy, Doc.'

'But you don't sound too sure.'

McGee shifted uncomfortably. 'Well, it's just that you're new here in town an' all - '

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing, Doc. Nothing.'

Maston gazed at him, unsmiling. 'If you've anything to say, say it.'

McGee retreated without moving at all. He shook his head and smiled wanly. 'Oh, no, Doc. Ain't my place to say nuthin'. I've nuthin' to say. Would I speak against the girl you're going to marry - much as you've come to mean to us - to me an' my family?' He winced and tried to smile again, lamely. 'It's just that we want you to like it here in town . . . Just want you to be sure.'

At one a.m., Maston's boarding house room lamp was still burning.

Pacing up and down in his room, he went over in his mind his love for Lizabeth and the attitude of this holier-than-thou, hidebound little town. He wanted her. Whether he wanted to or not, he could never go back to his old life. This new existence he made for himself here had to be predicated on completely displacing, denying and forsaking the world he'd come from and all the people in it . . . all the people. In the weeks he'd been here Lizabeth's beauty and exciting personality and cool charm had become the driving force in his life. He did not see how he could live in the same locale with her unless she was part of him . . .

He woke up the next morning exhausted and red-eyed from lack of sleep. He wanted Lizabeth as much, more than ever. But he had to know what transgressions, lapses, errors these pious townspeople charged against her name.

He kept remembering the first night he met her. During their second dance set, she'd said something about everyone in the room's watching every move they made. He'd laughed. 'Sorry, I just wasn't looking at them.'

'You'd look,' she'd said, unsmiling, 'if you were watched

as closely as I am.'

He'd nodded. 'People are strange. It would be a beautiful world, if it weren't for people, wouldn't it?'

She'd exhaled heavily. 'I could certainly get along without them. But you – what would you do for patients?'

He'd smiled. 'Oh, I'd probably be an excellent veterinarian.'

It had seemed harmless banter at the time. Suddenly it was no longer banter, no longer harmless.

He was waiting in the brilliant morning sunlight outside the Senate Chambers when Walter-Tom McGee opened the doors at nine. McGee's face flushed faintly and his eyes widened slightly as he said good morning.

'For a man who doesn't even like the taste of beer, wine or whiskey, Doc, you're around mighty early.'

'I've got to talk to you.'

'Sure. Come on in. I'll heat up my burner and make us a couple of eggs.'

'It's kind of important. It's what we were talking about last night.'

McGee's intense discomfort showed in his freshly shaven face. 'What was that, Doc?'

'Ever since I've started calling on Lizabeth, I've been getting these snide smiles, glances, leers – people acting as if I shared some – some dirty joke with them. And I don't. I don't want to. But they act as if there is something I ought to know . . . I know damned few people here. If there's anyone I could talk to and get straight answers, it has to be you.'

McGee had gone behind the bar. He lit a small oil-burning grill and stood for some moments with his back to Maston. 'What you want to know, Doc?'

'Don't you go coy on me. I need a friend. I hope it's you.'

McGee sighed heavily and turned around. 'All right, Doc. I do like you. My wife and kids love you. Folks in small towns just don't naturally take quick to strangers. But you're different. We like you here – we want you to like it here – and to stay here.'

'All very lovely. But what's it got to do with Lizabeth Hayward?'

McGee drew a deep breath, held it. He placed both hands on the bar and braced himself upon it. 'It's just rumours, Doc. Hearsay. Gossip. A lot of talk.'

'About Lizabeth?'

'Since she was in high school.' McGee nodded. 'She's a beautiful girl. Maybe the loveliest that ever lived in these parts. And spirited. Not many like her – none I know of. She's – well, she's broke a lot of rules, according to gossip . . . and you keep thinkin' where there's smoke there's got to be fire, you know –'

'It's the fire I want to hear about.'

'Like you know, Doc. A Bible-belt town like this – has a lot of rules and restrictions an' all – especially on a young girl . . . a girl growin' up has got to walk a pretty narrow path . . . and well, them that won't –'

'Lizabeth didn't walk the straight and narrow –'

'My old man always said the reason why the straight and narrow path was so straight and narrow was because so damn few people ever walked on it –'

'Are you going to tell me what the charges are against Lizabeth, or not?'

'Doc . . . That's it. She just grew up headstrong. Sort of fast. You know. That's what people said, anyhow – and then there was the time – recent – that she rode out – late one afternoon – with a young local fellow – and when they got back – well after dark it was – he refused to marry her.'

Maston sagged against the bar. He felt overwhelmed with relief. He laughed. 'Oh, my God. Is that all? Her reputation is ruined among evil-minded people because some fellow refused to marry her because he'd been alone with her?'

'Folks set a lot of store by that there particular rule.'

'Jesus. I'm sick of stupid rules of conduct. I'm sick of people who expect others to live by their rules.'

McGee peered at him across the bar, face grey. 'You mean it's all right with you? You don't care that people talk

about her like that?’

‘I pity her. That’s all . . . Do you mean do I intend to marry her? Of course I do.’

‘There are folks that think you’re making a mistake, Doc –’

‘I don’t give a damn what self-righteous hypocrites think. Tell you what, old son. I’ll not only marry Miss Lizabeth Hayward, I’ll shoot in the street the first man who speaks against her – from this moment.’

McGee laughed and poured snifters of brandy for both of them. ‘I’ll sure pass that word around, Doc.’

They toasted each other and drank.

VI

The entire Hayward household was a place of confusion. Extra cooks and helpers bumped each other in the old kitchen, the family dining room had been given over as storage area for gifts for the bride. Though there were supplementary black maids and male servants, there was a look of chaos about the old home, every room seemed disarrayed and disordered.

As far as Mrs Hayward was concerned there had not been, and could not conceivably be, a more important event in her family’s history than their daughter’s approaching marriage ceremony.

Van Elliot protested dispassionately. He managed to intercept Nettie on the wide staircase in the midst of one of her endless errands. He stood on a riser below her, and though she was a tiny woman he had to look up at her. ‘Do you think this is in – in good taste, Nettie?’

The slender little woman stopped in mid-stride, her arms spilling tulle, lace and chiffon. She stared down at him along her patrician nose, offended. She could not remember when was the last time anyone had dared question her propriety, gentility or breeding. As far as she was concerned, she did the correct thing instinctively.

‘Good taste?’ She bit off the words.

He spread his slender, blue-veined hands. ‘A big wedding, Nettie. A huge, expensive church wedding.’

She drew a deep breath, but spoke with deceptive gentleness. ‘Ever since Lizabeth was born, Van, I’ve dreamed ahead to this moment.’

He nodded, wincing. ‘I’m sure you have, Nettie. But – under the present grievous circumstances – the war and all – to invite *ten* of Lizabeth’s young female acquaintances from as far away as Mobile and Jacksonville – ’

‘They’re close, intimate friends she knew in finishing school.’

‘I realize that. But ten of them? In these times – ?’

‘They can all stay here in the house – ’

‘I’m sure they can. But you miss my point, Nettie.’

She stirred impatiently. ‘I certainly do.’

‘With travel so difficult. So expensive. With money so tight – ’

‘If you begrudge your only daughter – ’

‘My God, Nettie. Try to understand me. I begrudge Lizabeth nothing. Nothing. . . . I’m talking about the war. There is a war, you know, and it is going badly. We are not losing, we are being decimated. The entire Confederacy is bankrupt – ’

‘What has that to do with what we are able to give Lizabeth?’

‘It’s kind of like Marie Antoinette inviting the peasants to eat cake.’

‘I don’t see that at all.’

‘I’m sure you don’t, Nettie. But there will be people who will. Many people. Some of these girls Lizabeth has invited may not be able to afford – ’

‘Van! They’re from the very best families – ’

‘That’s what I’m trying to say, Nettie. There are no *best* families any more. These elite people have lost most, because they had most to lose. To stage a colossal wedding just now is almost mocking them – almost like saying we don’t give a damn – ’

'I care about the war. It breaks my heart to hear of the casualties and the burning and looting and murder. I realize the hell we're all in. I am not an empty vessel, Van. . . . But how can *anyone* begrudge a nice church wedding for our only daughter?'

'Nettie. . . . People are starving. Not here in north Florida, perhaps. But in every other part of the Confederacy there is actual starvation. Some of those *best* families of yours have had their very homes razed to the ground. Burned down around them. They are going hungry - '

'Van. Please be reasonable. . . . This may be the last thing we'll ever be able to do for Lizabeth. . . . I don't care what people think. I am confident enough of myself and of who I am, and of the sacrifices we have made, not to care what stupid people say. . . . If we look vulgar to some of them, well I'm just sorry - '

'I want a big wedding for Lizabeth, Nettie, as much as you do. Maybe even more. Maybe my reasons are even more selfish. There are certain people who have dishonoured and shamed me and my good name. I'd love to show these - these - these churls - that my daughter is making a suitable, an excellent marriage. . . . I want that . . . But I realize how selfish it is. And I cannot close my eyes to how desperate the economy is - and to waste like this - '

'Waste?' Nettie straightened, rigid and inflexible. Her mouth drew into a taut line, furrowed like a stale prune. She spoke in a low, flat voice. 'Do you want me to call it off, Van Elliot? Is that what you want, Judge Hayward? At this late hour?'

Looking at her, he knew he had lost. Despite, or even perhaps because of the rightness of his position, the wedding would proceed as scheduled - the flower-banked Presbyterian church, the ten bridesmaids, the overflow reception, the banquets and breakfasts and parties and sit-down dinners, the whole excessive rite. It was on. Though the Confederacy writhed in death throes and crumpled around them, the gala ceremony would be

solemnized in all its pomp and display. He shivered faintly.

He spread his hands, managed to smile, and shook his head, disavowing any dissent. He retreated, trying to stay out of the way as much as possible in the next few days. . . .

Lizabeth was in the midst of a second fitting when the red-haired Jennifer Keyes swept into her oversized bedchamber, with its tall windows looking out across shrubs, hedges, dogwood in bloom and shaven lawn to the remote street.

Lizabeth twisted on the dressmaker's pedestal, smiling. She saw that Jennifer wore a dress which was at least three seasons old; but for Jenny this was just another inconvenience of the war, one of the sacrifices she had to endure, simply because there were no new fabrics, patterns or designs to be had at any price because of the Federal blockade. She carried a bell-crown straw picture hat, flowered and laced, carelessly at her side.

Lizabeth formed her lips into a fleeting kiss across the cluttered room, but Jennifer barely smiled.

'Could all this wait, Liz?' Jennifer waved her arm, indicating the dressmaker, seamstresses and maids, wading in gossamer fabrics and cotton thread.

Lizabeth frowned, but assented, sending the women from the room. Few people ever opposed Jenny, or even went against her, even when her demands were couched smilingly as requests. There was native imperiousness about Jenny that anticipated compliance.

Jennifer was one of the self-aware belles of the western world. Since the moment of birth, she had been pampered, spoiled and deferred to. Even if she'd been less than radiantly lovely, she might have compensated with an unshakable inner self-confidence which had been fed into her and reinforced since she first wailed for attention in her cradle. She moved through her world in a sweet, self-attentive way that demanded privilege and obeisance. And in return, she was unfailingly proper – even prudish, prim, discriminating, fastidious in her conduct in public – as

if this were a part of that polish of her superb total beauty, of mind and spirit and body. She had been borne along through girlhood on waves of triumph and concord. She was more than vaguely aware of the sacrifices and anguish suffered in her name and in the name of all gentle Southern womanhood, but in her case, this seemed no more than mete and right.

Jennifer wandered about the room, touching, inspecting, fingering and probing among fabrics and laces.

Lizabeth watched her, feeling her heart sink slightly, knowing something was wrong without having any idea what it could be.

She felt a sense of pity mixed with triumph, looking at her closest friend. Though everyone said they were both lovely, she knew it had never occurred to Jennifer and her formidable mother that she might be getting married before Jenny did.

She and Jenny had shared and belonged entirely to that suddenly lost and unretrievable exciting world of the youthful Southern aristocracy. They had been swept along in pleasure until the war abruptly destroyed that world and left them, reigning belles, without proms, parties or ballrooms to scandalize or mesmerize, depending on their moods.

Lizabeth sighed. As for herself, she could always be found in the midst of brightest pleasures, from Charleston to Mobile, from Jacksonville to Savannah. She'd had more fun than Jennifer because Jenny was always circumspect, careful of her public reputation. Jenny and Mrs Keyes based their entire conduct on one premise: what will people think and say? Lizabeth never gave a damn. This was one of the only truly remarkable differences between her and her lifelong friend.

Lizabeth smiled faintly, watching Jennifer loiter about the room.

Jennifer had always been so careful, but Lizabeth had exploited her secure position in that protected universe of those finishing schools for young ladies where the very

wealthy sent their daughters to be pampered, petted, polished and prepared for the most advantageous marriage possible. Here, Elizabeth had concentrated on outwitting the authorities, of drawing the last, brightest laughter from a stolen night. Jennifer, instead, had wanted to find out all there was to know about meeting, subduing and wedding the most affluent eligible.

Elizabeth sighed deeply, feeling a rush of loss and chill. She had found suddenly that all the dances were charity affairs to aid families of heroic dead, the parties were all farewells to the finest young men, the kisses were no longer stolen sweets in some hidden bower, but were hurried, hasty and unsatisfactory goodbyes on crowded station platforms. Nobody was laughing any more. Everywhere people were crying in loss and heartbreak. She had not changed, but the men who had begged for her favours were abruptly rushed away north to fight the invader, and ballrooms were way-stations for the wounded, warehouses for military equipment and material. It was as if everyone had fled, leaving her dressed for galas in a land where pleasure was no more than a melancholy memory. Her love letters were now pitiable cries of agony and despair from some distant battlefield. Often the writer had already died violently in some alien battleground before she even received his passionate declaration of eternal devotion. For a long time now she had lived in a chilled state of restless discontent.

She had felt lost because she had never been prepared for this strange and ugly new world where dance calls became military cadances, dress suits butternut grey uniforms; pianos, violins and banjos were stilled and the slow throb of war drums replaced them.

She wakened in the night, chilled and frightened and abandoned. Where were the men she had driven to wondrous despair? She had broken young hearts and shattered older ones. She'd collected lovers and proposals like names on a dance card – transient, migrant, quickly forgotten. But suddenly it was she who was forsaken, she

whose heart broke as darkness of war spread, a cancerous shadow from Virginia to northern Florida, and laughter died in strangled cries.

She had been overwhelmed by a pervading sense of loss and desolation, and she had reacted in angry response against that distress. She had committed some grievous mistakes before young Dr Devereau asked her to marry him. She regretted much she had done, but there had been no way to know that an ideal suitor like Maston Devereau would come along in the depth of wartime. She felt as if she'd been somehow endowed with a dowry for the man who'd marry her, but in the mindless panic of depression and fear, she'd spent off most of her coins until she had almost nothing left . . .

She shook the thought from her mind, aware that Jennifer had not made the same errors; she had not reacted in terror; she had somehow remained constant in a world gone insane around her. And suddenly Lizabeth hated her for it.

Jennifer's voice was soft, with a rod of steel thrust through it, when she spoke over her shoulder from Lizabeth's full-length mirror where she regarded herself with ill-concealed serenity. 'I wondered, Liz, what have you told Dr Devereau?'

Lizabeth straightened; this was not by any means the first time she'd heard Jennifer assume this tone of honeyed-sweetness to coat her bitchiness. Lizabeth's face paled and her eyes glittered. 'About what?'

Jenny turned her head slowly. 'Are you being totally honest with him, dear?'

'Don't you think that's between Maston and me?'

'I certainly do.'

'Then what are you talking about?'

Jenny turned back to the mirror. 'Have you told him - ' she pulled down her lower eyelid and examined her pupils, ' - about Ham?'

Lizabeth caught her breath in a sharp, audible gasp. 'Hampton?'

'Is it honest, darling, to marry a wonderful man like Maston Devereau without telling him the truth – about oneself – about Hampton?'

Lizabeth shook her head. 'My God, Jennifer. Are you determined to ruin my entire day? Or is it my whole wedding ceremony you're trying to – to sabotage?'

Jennifer shrugged. 'I'm only asking you questions, darling, that I think you ought to be asking yourself.'

Lizabeth's voice shook in helpless outrage. 'By what right?'

'We've always been candid – and helpful – with each other, haven't we?'

Lizabeth took a belligerent step forward, stopped. 'All right. Candid. May I be candid with you?'

'I hope you will, darling.'

'Are you still angry – and envious – and jealous – because Maston didn't date you – as you and your mother planned?'

Jennifer turned reluctantly from the mirror and smiled almost pityingly. 'That is part of the past, dear. It has nothing to do with what I'm asking you.' Jenny tried to laugh casually, to lighten the moment of tension between them. 'After all, as you've said yourself – many times – when some of your beaux turned to *me* – there's no accounting for tastes, is there?'

Lizabeth did not smile. She remained standing taut, her hands clenched into aching fists in the folds of her dress. 'What kind of *taste* is this, Jenny? Coming here like some meddlesome old woman – like some inquisitor – ?'

'And not as a very old friend?'

Lizabeth shook her head. 'You are jealous. My God. My God. You are jealous and you're letting it turn you against me.'

'I hope you won't let such thoughts poison your mind – and ruin our friendship, Liz. . . . Because that's not true. I am not jealous. But I'm not deaf, either, to the scandalous talk going around this town about you and Hampton. . . . How long do you think it will be before *Maston* hears what everyone else in town has already heard – the disgraceful

way you threw yourself – ’

‘What do you want, Jennifer? What is the point of this?’

Jennifer shrugged. ‘I am trying to be friendly – as we have always been. . . . You don’t want that, I can see.’

‘That’s true, dear.’

‘So I’ll get right to the true reason for my visit – ’

‘My God! You mean there’s more?’

‘You simply refuse to face the truth, don’t you, Lizabeth?’

‘I face the truth my way, Jenny. Just as you do. It’s simply that we don’t react the same, even to the same situations . . . Please, don’t worry about Maston and me . . . Whatever is wrong, if there is any wrong, I will work it out . . . After all, I have the rest of my life to do that.’

‘I hope so.’ Jennifer drew a deep breath, eyes cold. ‘Then I’ll get directly to the purpose of my visit . . . I came to tell you that I can’t be your maid of honour.’

Lizabeth stared at her lifelong friend. How hateful she was suddenly. How could she ever have loved her, trusted her above all other people, with her most intimate thoughts and dreams – and confessions? All at once, it seemed to her, she saw Jennifer as a tall, thin, shrewish young woman, self-righteous and puritanical beyond belief, where weaknesses of others were concerned. Jenny didn’t even look pretty standing there; her features were remarkable but her eyes were cold and mean. She looked vindictive. To think this was the female to whom she had opened her heart, laid bare all her secrets. Abruptly, Lizabeth did not like her old friend any more, and she did not trust her. She hated the kind of casual cruelty and the over-polite bigotry of which Jenny was capable. She felt that Jenny had never really cared anything about her behind that bright, smiling mask. She behaved in her cordial, well-mannered way, while all the time she looked along her nose at her most intimate of friends.

Her face burned. What right did Jenny have to put on airs? It was true that her father had once been a territorial governor of Florida – all very wonderful while it lasted – but

he was only a very ordinary and aging attorney in town now, nobody really, except for a family name and a grand position in the past. And the terrible thing was that she had never even suspected that all these years Jennifer Keyes had patronized her, thought her kind of common.

'Jenny,' she said. 'You are the only one who could be my maid of honour. . . . The oldest friend I have. . . . Why are you suddenly acting like this?'

'I'm sorry, Liz. . . . I truly am . . . I know what kind of awkward position this puts you in - '

'Impossible, Jenny . . . you know that.'

'Well, I can't help it. I'm sorry. But there is nothing I can do.'

Lizabeth blinked away angry tears. 'Do you - mind saying why?'

Jennifer sighed heavily. 'Since that - that trouble with Hampton - that actually made you the laughing-stock of this town, Liz - and I can't help that - my parents have not wanted me to see you. Especially my father. . . . Well, the truth is, he says I am not to associate with you any more - '

'Not - *associate*? Associate? Jenny, you're my best friend - '

'I've said I'm sorry.'

'We've been friends - all our lives. . . . Since the first grade in school. . . . All our lives. . . . If you don't stand up with me as my maid of honour - '

'I'm sorry, Liz.'

'Jenny, if you do this to me - I swear, I'll never speak to you again.'

Jennifer shrugged. 'I told you. I've been ordered to say this. . . . There's nothing I can do.'

'Damn you,' Lizabeth whispered tautly. 'There's nothing you *want* to do, is there?'

Jennifer shrugged again.

VII

When Jennifer walked, head tilted and supple back rigid, out of her bedroom, closing the door gently behind her, Lizabeth stood unmoving for a long time.

She felt as if the world wheeled and skidded around her. She heard a distant barking of dogs, the hum of insects at the honeysuckle vines beyond her window, Jenny's overly sweet voice chatting with the women in the upstairs hallway as she passed toward the staircase.

Only when she heard the women moving along the corridor to return to her fitting, did Lizabeth move at all. She walked stiffly across the room and locked the corridor door. She leaned against it, impervious to the rapping, the insistent calls, her mother's troubled inquiry. Then she plodded through the chaotic lace and linens to her open window. She braced herself against its sill, staring out at the lawn, the street, the sky, and seeing none of it.

Through her mind raced a caterwauling of voices, a jumble of scenes, the memory of Hampton. Desolated, she shivered with terror, recalling it all, whether she wanted to or not. . . .

It was just another serenely lazy, yellow-tinted afternoon, like hundreds of others spent shopping downtown, arms linked with Jennifer, both apparently unaware that they were the focus of all attention, with every eye watching each move they made, each toss of lovely head, every blindingly gorgeous smile.

Covertly, secretly, deliciously, they were keenly attuned to their own celebrity – the two loveliest creatures in the painful recall of the oldest, regretful male crouched over forsaken checkerboard in the deepening shade of trees or overhangs along busy Adams Street.

The homage of the unwashed mob only confirmed what their mirrors faithfully reaffirmed a dozen times a day. They were as delicately, remarkably alluring as they'd ever dreamed they might be, erupting stunningly and abruptly

into young womanhood – almost the only bright colours remaining in a ravaged and war-savaged region.

It was as if some profligate gods had piled beauty and bewitching charm lavishly upon them, to squander as they willed. Strong young hearts pumped heated blood close against soft and dainty cheeks, and inner rapture and self-delight glowed deep in ecstatically guileless eyes.

Hampton Gates had pulled his polished new single-seat runabout buggy across their path at an intersection before they were aware of him. They gazed up at him, jerked from inner absorption and recognizing him with a sense of shock and the faint stirring that always bristled between them. They smiled, alert to a sudden fragile quiet in the busy downtown block, as people gaped openly at the three most dashing and showy ornaments left in a chastened and sobered society.

Young Gates preened, alone and languid on the boot of his carriage. His slender, six-foot frame, with golden-tanned skin and hard, untroubled blue eyes, possessed a feline grace and the beauty of chiselled perfection of which he was totally aware. His fair, smoothly curled hair bobbed over his forehead when he removed his silk top hat. His sharply hewn features were enhanced rather than marred by arrogantly tilted brow and innate haughty petulance flaring his aristocratic nostrils. He permitted them a warm, yet faintly aloof smile of greeting.

‘Shopping ladies?’ He grinned down at them, tongue in cheek. ‘Downtown? Without male escort? Whatever will people say?’

Oblivious to impeded traffic, Hampton looped reins casually on whip-socket and leaped with grace and easy agility to the walk beside them. He bowed again. ‘May I rescue you from certain scandal and social ostracism?’

‘You want us to ride with you?’ Jennifer was shocked from affected poise into artless honesty. Hampton Gates was twenty-five, a man of the world, incredibly wealthy even in war-torn north Florida, and he had seldom before even glanced toward them in his bored, aloof way.

'If you'd like to. Of course I would.'

Jennifer glanced at Lizabeth who nodded without hesitation. Jennifer wavered, more hesitant, because she was less rash, ruled as she was by what people would think. It certainly was improper to allow oneself to be picked up on a public street by a man who was no more than an acquaintance. Still, when Hampton replaced his top hat at its rakish angle upon his head and reached for Lizabeth's elbow, Jennifer lithely insinuated herself between them and was thus assisted first up to the deeply cushioned, leather-covered seat. Hampton helped Lizabeth up beside her, giving her elbow a faint, conspiratorial squeeze before he went around the buggy and swung into the seat beside them. Jennifer shifted, almost imperceptibly, pressing her rounded hip against his leg.

'It's just so delightful to find a handsome, genteel young man like you at home and out of uniform these days,' Jennifer said, smiling up at him.

Hampton shrugged. 'I suppose many people think I ought to be in the army. I suppose you do?'

'Oh not at all.' Jennifer flushed, shaking her head back and forth negatively. 'Not at all.'

Hampton's face flushed slightly. He had remained aloof to the battles for five years, but he had suffered reproach, criticism and resentment. For the first time in his life he was infected with the virus of guilt. He found himself, often, as now, justifying himself, even when he was not questioned. 'I would have enlisted . . . I was offered a full-captaincy . . . But my father refused to permit it. Frankly, he said that people - of my class - were never meant to actually go into battle. And it was not as if either of us felt we were protecting our homelands against a criminal invader. Frankly, our sympathies - as well as our financial interests - were with the North -'

'You're joking,' Jennifer whispered, aghast. She had never heard these words before in her life. They made Hampton Gates more exciting, strange and appealing than ever. She shivered faintly.

'Well, we weren't the only ones . . . We opposed secession. We tried to preach reason – the war was hopeless from the start –'

Jennifer gasped at this blasphemy, but said nothing.

'How could the Confederacy win? Against an industrialized power already supplying munitions worldwide? And the south an agrarian society without even armament industry? Of course, no one would listen. And then in 1861, the Confederate government began to confiscate debts owed to northern creditors and northern sympathizers. They even began that year to confiscate property of northerners. It was smarter to keep our mouths shut.' He laughed. 'Our mouths shut and our markets open. So that's what we did.'

'I never knew a northern sympathizer,' Jennifer said.

'You know more of them than you realize. Most are smart enough to keep silent and stay out of prison. As I said, I was prepared to enter the army, but my father refused to permit it. He paid the government a commutation fee and even went further and furnished a substitute as well, a sharecropper from one of our turpentine farms.'

'How clever,' Jenny said, her large eyes round. 'I didn't even know you could do that.'

Hampton Gates glanced down along his patrician nose at her but spoke across her to Lizabeth. 'Don't you ever join a conversation, Miss Lizabeth?'

Lizabeth smiled across Jennifer at him. 'When there's a chance to get a word in edgeways, Mr Gates.'

Jennifer gave her a murderous glance from the corners of her smouldering eyes. 'I do hope you don't think I chatter, Mr Gates.'

'Of course not. And you mustn't call me *Mister* Gates. My name is Hampton. I'd like you to call me that. Both of you.'

'It's just that I'm so pleased to get to visit with you like this,' Jennifer chattered on. 'And I'm just pleased that we can be together like this. . . . With Lizabeth along, I mean

... Last thing in the world we want is people talking about us ... I do hope you understand, Mr Hampton?

'I hope I do,' Hampton teased. 'And of course I'm deeply flattered.'

Jennifer shivered deliciously and settled her warm hip closer upon his.

Lizabeth could never afterwards say whether she or Jennifer was most shocked when Hampton's rig pulled in and stopped at the curb before the white picket fence which surrounded Governor Keyes' – former Governor, of course – estate.

'I'll walk you to the door, Miss Jennifer,' Hampton Gates said. 'If you will permit me.'

Jennifer's mouth parted twice before she spoke at all. At last, she said, 'Of course. How gallant of you, Hampton ... Are you coming in, Lizabeth?'

Lizabeth glanced toward Hampton, found his face taut, waiting. She smiled and shrugged. 'I guess not, Jenny. Not this time. It's so late and all.'

'Oh, I'll be pleased to drive Miss Hayward home,' Hampton said. 'It's right on my way.'

Lizabeth heard Jenny's sharp intake of breath as she heeled away and crossed the walk. She preceded Hampton Gates through the gate and into the yard without bothering to say goodbye to Lizabeth.

Lizabeth sat on the carriage boot, watching them walk in the late afternoon sunlight toward the wide, columned veranda, her heart pounding oddly, her throat taut.

Lizabeth sat unmoving, her hands folded in her lap when Hampton swung up to the boot beside her, grinning. 'Don't you worry, little lady,' he said. 'I'll have you home before the first old biddy can chirp one word of gossip about you.'

Lizabeth shrugged. 'Nothing concerns me less than what stupid, chattering old people say.'

Hampton laughed, putting his head back. 'I've heard that about you,' he said.

Lizabeth drew a deep breath but did not reply. The

Tennessee trotter moved gracefully, his tan coat gleaming in the fading sun, his cropped tail like a plume. Hampton allowed the beautiful horse to set its own pace, the lines run through the long fingers of his strong-looking hand. The buggy rattled over the ill-paved old streets, but Lizabeth was not uncomfortable on the deeply upholstered leather seat.

She was feveredly aware of the sensation she and Hampton Gates created, crossing the few short blocks to her own home. All eyes of the town were upon them, especially those unseen ones, avid behind pinked curtains along the sombre, silent avenues.

She held her breath a long time as if caught in the enchantment of a spell which might evaporate if she breathed or moved at all. Nobody had to tell her how lovely she was, how the rush of excited blood brightened her smooth, fresh complexion, and the breezes played with the floppy brim of her hat, fluttered the frail fabric of her scarf. And how handsome and aristocratic – and the nearest thing to nobility in the crumbling Confederacy – Hampton Gates was. What a beautiful couple they made in this bright buggy, what an enchanting, expensive picture they presented. And most breathtaking of all, he had eyes only for her. Hampton Gates was interested in her. He certainly behaved as if he were.

She heard the magic words he spoke, 'It's so good to see you like this – alone – even for a few minutes –'

'You'll turn my head with such talk, Mr Gates ...'

'I'd like nothing better.'

'You are teasing. I know you've been all over the world, spent years in Europe. I'm just a small town girl. I've never been anywhere.' She laughed. 'I did go to finishing school in Mobile –'

'Then they ought to send all the young girls there. You really are a sensation –'

'Yes. I'm sure we are. Both of us. I'm certain the whole town full of old gossips is calling you a cad and me a brazen little hussy – driving out alone like this.'

'I thought you didn't care.'

'I don't.' She laughed. 'In fact, I love it . . . I could drive like this for hours.'

Something flickered in his lean, self-indulgent face. 'With me?'

'Why, that's what I meant, Mr Gates.'

He exhaled heavily, gazing at her. 'I've thought about you a lot, Lizabeth. . . . But I wasn't sure how you might feel toward me - maybe you thought me a slacker, a coward, the way everybody else does.'

She didn't say it had never even occurred to her that a man, though he was of military age, as wealthy, influential and politically powerful, and of a class totally removed from the ordinary middle classes, would be liable for army service. Instead, she shrugged and said only, 'My own father was against secession.'

'Was he? Well. That gives us something else in common, doesn't it?'

'Something *else*, Mr Gates?'

He laughed. 'We're both beautiful. Both young - '

'And both being talked about, right this minute.'

She could not pretend she cared what the townspeople said about her at this moment. She felt as removed from them as she'd always thought the Gates family removed from common rabble. From birth she had been prepared by her mother, and all her training, for this moment, for an alliance with the most eligible man possible. A girl like Lizabeth was trained to attract, interest and ensnare the most promising male in her sphere or the realm above. In her own mind she had accepted this as her destiny, adding secretly that to the one man she found, loved and married, she would open her heart and body and soul, and give herself totally and forever only to him. This seemed the most beautiful fantasy of all to her. And at this moment it was painfully and excruciatingly real and sweetly anguishing to her.

As if suddenly awakening from a most pleasant and satisfying dream, she realized with a sharp, aching stab of

pain that the bubble had burst for her already, the moment had past, the spell ended. Hampton Gates turned his buggy into her driveway long before she was aware they were even on the street where she lived.

‘Won’t you come in for a moment?’ She kept her smile cool, reticent, though her heart raged in her rib-cage. ‘We could sit on the swing for a while, if you like. . . . I’m sure the servants could fix you a julep or something.’

Hampton hesitated. He had no wish to enter this house, or to become involved with her parents. He’d met mothers – and fathers – ambitious for a daughter’s advantageous alliance. Still, he was entranced with this girl’s full-breasted, sloe-eyed beauty. He didn’t want to leave her so soon. If remaining in her warm orbit required playing a game of socializing, God knew training and experience had equipped him well. The old days before the war at the University of Virginia had polished him and imbued in him all the amenities, even down to dealing with bores, inferiors and anxious parents.

He tossed the lines loosely over the hitching post near the steps. He helped Lizabeth alight from the buggy and she smiled coolly up at him as she preceded him on the steps.

Breathless, pleased, excited, Lizabeth was faintly surprised that Hampton Gates had agreed to join her on her front porch, even briefly, meet her mother. She’d never dreamed he would ever call on her, or look at her, except in passing. She’d learned that other rich young plantation-bred socialites had been willing to sneak into her drive after dark, to meet her surreptitiously, walk lonely lanes with her, but they managed to reveal to her in a hundred ways how groundless any attachments between them must be.

To her astonishment, Hampton Gates was warm, friendly and intrigued. She felt a rush of warmth, looking at him. She knew how wealthy his family was – at least how much more affluent than even the richest of the other county leaders. And she’d been reared since infancy on how essential was social status as acquired through wealth, influence and established family. Her mother drilled into

her that she belonged among the 'best people', the blue-blooded, socially prominent. 'These were always my dearest friends,' Nettie had assured her from childhood. 'You should look for these qualities in the young people you meet.' Well, Hampton Gates more than qualified in every aspect.

Many people yearned to move upward in the social world, but for Nettie Hayward and, after years of indoctrination, for her daughter, this desire was no longer a driving motivation, it became an obsession. As she walked up the steps with him to her shadowed veranda, Lizabeth was already contriving ways to arouse and sharpen his appetites. None of this was premeditated, conscious or cold. She was by now merely acting from habit and training.

Nettie must have been watching from behind front room draperies. She came through the screen door almost at the moment Hampton Gates and Lizabeth came off the steps. A slender woman, she was harried and anxious looking even when she smiled cordially. There was tension about her that Hampton Gates had encountered a hundred times before in women distracted by ambitions for a daughter. Her hair was prematurely grey, but she set and brushed it with great care and attention. She invited Hampton to sit down and hurried off to arrange refreshments.

'Don't mind mother,' Lizabeth said with a crooked smile. 'She has no idea how transparent she is.'

He laughed. 'I was looking at your eyes – and wondering what colour they really are.'

She met his gaze coolly and levelly. 'What colour would you like them to be?'

'Just when I think they're hazel, I see they're blue. And then I see they are really a deep kind of violet. Quite lovely.'

'How nice! You make me sound so exciting.'

'You're exciting, all right.' He stopped speaking when Mrs Hayward reappeared with refreshments on a tray. He took it from her and set it on a table. He managed to smile at her, but the smile didn't reach the hard blue eyes. She

launched at once into what close friends she had been with his mother in those long ago days before either of them were married.

Lizabeth shifted restlessly on the swing. 'It's so stuffy hot,' she said.

'Why dear, I think there's a pleasant breeze,' her mother said.

Lizabeth seemed totally unaware of her. 'Maybe if we went for a little drive in your buggy, Hampton. Just for a little while – before dark. . . . Somewhere – anywhere it's cool. It's just so hot in this old town.'

He was aware of a twitching deep in his loins. 'Whatever you want to do,' he said.

Lizabeth stood up abruptly, nodding. 'I need a swift, cool breeze in my face,' she said. 'I feel as if I'm suffocating . . .'

Hampton stood up. Nettie objected, but as he'd anticipated, her protests were weak. After all, all three of them were entirely aware that he was the most eligible bachelor in town, county or state. 'Please have her back by six at the latest, Mr Gates,' Nettie said. 'The Judge will be home to dinner then – and likely he'll be most upset that I allowed Lizabeth to drive out – without a chaperone.'

'Oh, mother, don't be so old-fashioned,' Lizabeth said.

Nettie smiled. 'Well, stay in the town limits. A young woman's reputation can be compromised in a town this size, as you well know, Mr Gates.'

Hampton Gates trotted his high-stepping horse and glossy-new buggy twice around the town square and once the length of Monroe Street because he saw this was what Lizabeth wanted. They were a handsome couple in the smart phaeton and nobody was more aware of it or excited about it than she.

'Hello, Miss Hayward.'

'Good afternoon, Miz Lizabeth, Mr Hampton.'

'Afternoon, Mr Gates – Miss Hayward.'

The very linking of their names delighted her, almost like rose petals strewn on her path. Shivering with the thrilled reaction she was getting from the townspeople, she

slithered her trim little bottom nearer him on the plush leather buggy seat. She even took his arm possessively.

He grinned in a mocking way, knowing her display was to impress her acquaintances, friends and enemies. Still, he could not deny the sharp surge of pleasure at the pressure of her high, full young breast against his bicep.

By cunning progression, almost by sleight of hand, he left the town behind them and drove them through the stillness of narrowing lanes into the deep, high forests.

He waited for her to protest; twilight was settling soft and lavender around them, like a velvet snare. She said only. 'Very cleverly done.'

He shrugged, grinning. 'Now you see them, now you don't.'

'They don't see us, either. But you can bet they are just beginning to talk about us.'

'Do you want to go back?'

'Do you?'

He said nothing, feeling a flaring of sweet anguish in his groin. She moved closer and tightened her locked hands on his arm. He felt as if all sensory reactions were concentrated in his right bicep, and he sensed the half-hitch twisting his loins. After a long moment he said, 'I don't know where you've been all my life.'

'Growing up, I guess.'

'You did one hell of a job of that,' he said. He sighed. 'I'm going to have to speak to my sisters. The next time there's a party or entertainment or a dance out at South Gates, they'll have to invite you. They'll want to when I tell them how nice you are.'

He felt the sudden aroused thunder of her heart against his arm. He wondered that she couldn't see that he was merely making a deal with her. Obviously, she couldn't. There was no bargain this girl wouldn't make to attain the goals her mother had set for her and which they both so relentlessly pursued. 'Will you tell your sisters – how nice I am?'

He grinned down at her. 'How nice are you?'

‘How nice do you want me to be?’

Again that twist deep in his belly, only now it was savage and fevered. He was no longer tentative. He put his arm about her and slipped his hand under her heated armpit, closing his fingers on her breast. She gasped slightly but said nothing and, after a long beat, she relaxed against him.

He laughed in an empty way. ‘I’ve been hearing some really interesting things about you.’

‘Have you?’

‘Bennett Cliff says you love to be loved. And Troy Stark told me you are wild when you love like this.’

She caught her breath and stiffened, though she did not move from his hand on her breast. Emboldened, he slipped it inside her dress.

‘I do hope you don’t believe such – such slander.’

‘Why of course I don’t, honey.’ His voice sounded genuine, but the way he lifted her breast over the top of her bodice made him a liar.

‘Why, I hardly know them. Either one of them.’

Breathing raggedly, he was massaging her rigid pink nipple between his fingers. He felt her hips writhe slightly, involuntarily. He said, ‘Don’t you think I’m far too intelligent – and experienced – to believe immature lies? We both know how men love to boast, don’t we?’ His hand closed on her bared breast, roughly. His breath was short and hot against her face. ‘They love to boast of conquests with a young girl as lovely as you.’

‘I’m not a conquest.’

‘Of course you’re not.’ Now he loosened her dress and spilled both of her lovely breasts out to his view. ‘You’re not at all. You’re just a sweet and lovely young girl. My God, how lovely.’

She arched her back slightly, again almost involuntarily. Her high-standing breasts reared higher against his fevered hands. ‘Do you think I’m lovely?’

Sick longing almost cut off his breath. ‘I want to look at you,’ he whispered, pulling the buggy off the country road into an abandoned glen.

‘But you are looking at me.’

‘I want to look at all of you, Lizabeth . . . You’re so beautiful, I want to see all of you.’

She shivered. ‘What would you think of me – if I let you do that?’

He was already loosening the tiny buttons of her dress along her spine. His fingers trembled. He could have done it easier and quicker with both hands, but he continued to massage and caress her breasts and roll her hard nipples between his fingers of one busy hand. Her breasts were swollen. He closed his mouth upon them, pressing his nose into the scented, freshly sweet cleavage.

He allowed the horse to wander to a halt in a darkening, silent copse. Faint and fading sunlight filtered wanly through the high canopies of tall trees. The late afternoon hammock world was still, hushed.

‘My God, Lizabeth,’ Hampton whispered. ‘I never saw anyone so lovely. . . . I never wanted anyone so much.’

As he talked, he worked her dress down over the glossy peach-coloured planes of her body. Her nudity excited both of them, he because she was even lovelier than he’d imagined and she because she saw how much her nakedness aroused him and because this was new to her, something was happening to her that had never happened before. She lay breathless, supine, unprotesting.

The dress would slip down no further than the widening of her slender hips. Her navel and a faint top fringe of dark hairs lining her mons veneris showed to his avid gaze. He bent down, suckling at her breasts, licking at her navel, sliding his tongue in a promissory way along the dainty fringing of femininity exposed to him.

Holding her reclined across the leather seat, Hampton lifted his head, his eyes distracted. ‘I’ve got to – fuck – you, Lizabeth,’ he said. ‘I can’t stand this.’

Unlike any other young woman he’d ever encountered, Lizabeth did not flinch in prim dismay at the forbidden word. She only nodded, misty-eyed, trembling slightly.

He raked her voluminous skirts and crinolines upward

above her thighs. He caressed the long, golden, trimly turned legs, from her thighs to her ankles. She lay back on the seat, passive, waiting. He had meant to raise her skirts only above her thighs, but roused and encouraged by her bewitched serenity, he worked her clothing over her head, dropping the garments over the back of the seat rest.

He rolled her lace-trimmed panties down over her knees and off her feet. He clung to the heated and fragrant undergarment, crushing the fabric in his fist.

He tried to mount her on the narrow seat. She attempted to open her legs for him, but in the confined space this was impossible. The horse stirred restively and the buggy trembled.

‘Maybe we ought to get out,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t you have a blanket?’

He nodded his head, agreeing, but he was too far gone to comply. Instead, he lifted her bodily and brought her down, facing him, across his lap. He gripped her hips and thrust himself savagely upward into her. She cried out when he penetrated her, struggling. He didn’t see the twinge of pain in her face because he didn’t want to see it. He kept thinking in anguished delight that she writhed like a hooked fish and this pleased him. He had her and he was not going to let her get away.

But it was quickly over for Hampton. The excitement, the boiling frenzy in her thighs, and the unexpectedly quick surrender and easy gratification, intoxicated, overstimulated and galvanized him. Suddenly, he lost control. Biting at the softness of her inner shoulder, moaning and bucking his hips, he shuddered and sagged heavily back, exhausted.

‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered.

He opened his dry, bloodshot eyes. ‘My God ... don’t you know?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve never done this before ... not all the way like this ...’ She stared at him, her eyes anguished. ‘Is this all?’

His manhood questioned, Hampton’s face flushed red

and he bit at his lip, wincing. 'Listen,' he said. 'I'm sorry . . . I reckon you don't know . . . I got too excited. I wanted you too much, I came too quick . . . That's all. We can play . . . with each other . . . Just for a little while . . . I'll – show you how to make it hard for me again. . . . We'll get out and spread a blanket . . . It'll be all right then, Lizabeth . . . I promise . . .'

She nodded, troubled. In all her heated fantasies, nothing like this had ever happened. In her waking, intoxicating dreams, she'd been transported – she and her lover – into wild and frantic ecstasy. She lay against him, waiting submissively.

He lifted her off his lap and held her head down against his chest so she was staring down at his open fly. 'Hold it,' he told her. When she didn't move, he took her hand and pulled it over upon him. She found him soft and flaccid.

'Get it hard,' he whispered.

'What do you want me to do?' she said, trying to lift her head. But he held her in place firmly, unyielding, where she was. 'You'll have to tell me what to do . . .'

'I'll show you,' he said, his voice oddly hollow again. He pushed her head down upon his lap. He held her there. He reached under her face and took his hardening staff from her. She struggled slightly, but he only intensified his grip upon the crown of her head. He forced himself between her lips, prying her mouth open with it . . .

Standing at her window in her unfinished wedding gown, Lizabeth heard her mother's urgently pleading voice and the insistent rapping of her knuckles on the door facing. The memory evaporated abruptly, leaving her emptier, sicker, more forlorn than ever.

VIII

It was almost nine p.m. – and had been dark for nearly two hours – when they entered the driveway at the Hayward

home.

'Oh, God,' Lizabeth whispered, staring at her father who stood at the top of the veranda steps, with one foot on a lower riser as if he were ready to rush out again looking for her, or at least to spread the alarm that some evil had befallen her. The surest sign of his panic and the frantic searching, was the sweated saddle horse, reined in at the hitching post.

All the lights in the house blazed. Not one darkened window was visible. It was as if her parents had busied themselves going about the rooms lighting lamps, if for no better reason than to allay the dark dread that pervaded the night.

Even when he saw the phaeton enter the drive, Van Elliott did not move. It was as though he'd become rooted to the spot, distracted and mindless with despair.

Nettie stood a few feet behind him in the swathe of lamplight through the opened front doorway. Her hands were clasped in front of her. She did manage to smile and nod when Hampton Gates stopped the carriage at the foot of the wide steps. But for the moment she did not move, either.

As if abruptly released from some catatonic trance, Van Elliott ran down the steps to the gravel drive. He gazed up at Lizabeth, agonized. 'Are you all right? Are you both all right? There was no trouble?'

Lizabeth said, 'I'm all right, Father.'

'And I had no trouble. No trouble at all, sir,' young Gates said with a faint, taunting smirk.

Relieved and reassured, nevertheless the judge felt rage and resentment gorge up like evil-tasting bile from the pit of his belly where it had moiled and churned these past agonized hours. He fixed his gaze on Gates as if the young man were a criminal at his bar. 'Do you realize the time, sir?'

'No, sir.' Hampton shook his head. 'Time simply slipped away.'

'Four hours. Almost four hours you've been gone.'

Hampton continued to grin down at the trembling older man, unyieldingly affable. 'We did the best we could, sir.'

Van Elliott gasped and stared up at the young plantation aristocrat. If this young whippersnapper dared take this arrogant attitude in his courtroom, he'd cite him for contempt. He managed to keep his voice level. His hands shook and he clenched them into fists at his side. 'Best you could, Mr Gates? Four hours alone. At night. Unchaperoned. Are you treating this matter as some sort of joke, sir?'

'No, sir, but I see it as less than the world-shaking tragedy that you hold it to be.'

Van Elliott shook his head from side to side, gazing up at the younger man. 'Have you no sense of propriety, Mr Gates? No sense of fitness, of common decency, of the rules of accepted conduct? You keep a young seventeen-year-old girl out three hours past dark – alone and unchaperoned – and then grin in some empty-headed way as if it is all a joke.'

'Now, Van,' Nettie said from behind the judge. 'The young people are home. Safely. They've behaved foolishly. Recklessly. . . . But perhaps no lasting harm is done –'

'No harm?' The judge shuddered impotently and jerked his head around, gazing incredulously at his wife.

Tongue-in-cheek, Hampton swung down from the boot of the carriage. He came around it and helped Lizabeth to the ground.

Lizabeth moved away from him with only a quick glance. She walked past her father. She went up the wide steps to the brightly illuminated porch, but she avoided her mother's outstretched hand in the same way she'd drawn herself in as she passed her father. She stood silently, taut and withdrawn, near one of the tall white columns, face set and expressionless. She watched the three people as if they were totally unrelated to her, alien and removed.

Hampton watched her for a moment, then his taunting gaze raked across the judge. It was not that young Gates was unaware that Judge Hayward was a member of the

state supreme court. It was simply that Gates held not a modicum of respect or awe for any authority save that of his own father's feared name and his father's wide-reaching sphere of influence. As far as Hampton Gates was concerned – and as he had been subtly inclined – no public servant, no matter the apparent austerity of his office, was any more than another political flunky. He did not *care* what so-called position of responsibility Hayward held. To him, Hayward was another of the hirelings who did the bidding of men like Hampton's father, an aging man with stuffy ideas about conventions, a temporary nuisance, and nothing more. He spoke in a bantering tone of pretended concern, 'I do hope you were not too upset, Mrs Hayward?'

Nettie tried to smile. 'Of course I was worried, Mr Gates. . . . We didn't know what might have happened – these are such terrible and unsettled times – with deserters and other criminals prowling – though of course you are a most capable escort, I'm sure.'

'It's more than that,' Judge Hayward said. 'My daughter's reputation – her good name – is at stake here. Of course we were worried. We were beside ourselves with concern, young man. We had no idea what terrible thing may have happened.'

Hampton ignored the judge's ill-controlled outburst. He spoke in quiet charm to Nettie. 'We enjoyed a very pleasant drive, Mrs Hayward. Time just slipped away, unnoticed. And that's all that happened.'

Van Elliott stared up at the slender young Gates. 'No matter how circumspect you may consider your behaviour, Mr Gates, what you have done is insufferable. It is unforgivable. Intolerable. What happened – what could have happened – and thank God what did not happen – may not be as important to my daughter's reputation as what the good people of this town are going to think about your careless disregard for rules of decent conduct.'

Hampton shook his head, mouth twisted as if he tasted something unpleasant. He spoke in a chilled, petulant tone.

'Frankly, sir, I have no interest in what *people* think.'

The judge drew in a deep breath, trying to control his rage. 'I see that you don't. But perhaps you better had, sir. You may well have destroyed my daughter's reputation among the people with whom she has to live. I won't let you get away with that.'

Hampton gave him an impatient smile. 'We can't stop fools from chattering, now can we, sir, either one of us?'

'Perhaps I can't, Mr Gates. But in this case, you can . . . And you shall.'

'Oh? And how would you suggest I might do that?'

Nettie said, 'Now, let's none of us be hasty and say things we may regret - '

'Very wise counsel, Mrs Hayward.' Hampton bowed toward her.

'- I'm sure this whole matter can be handled quietly and satisfactorily. We can all work together. Not at odds. We all have common goals, I'm sure. We can put the brightest kind of face on this situation by having a small party here - tomorrow afternoon - announcing Lizabeth's engagement to Mr Gates.'

Hampton stared at Nettie a moment and then burst into sardonic laughter. 'Engagement? I can tell you, Mrs Hayward, I intend to marry no one.'

Nettie spoke in a soft, steel-hard tone. 'Perhaps. Yet, there may be no other respectable escape from this crisis.' She hesitated. 'An announcement of your betrothal may well be the only way out - whether, after a lengthy engagement you both reconsider . . . whether you finally marry or not is not as urgent as stopping ruinous and slanderous gossip about Lizabeth - which I'm sure none of us wants.'

Hampton straightened slightly. 'Madam, I have nothing but the highest regard for your daughter, and wish her only the best, and I would do anything reasonable to "protect" her good name. But engagement? Betrothal? Marriage? Madam, you must be joking . . . Do I look like some country bumpkin to be taken in by an overt attempt at

entrapment – ?’

‘Entrapment? You young cad. You’re insulting.’ Van Elliott’s voice quavered with his rage. ‘You’ve ruined our daughter in this town – besmirched her name. Your own sense of decency must demand that you do all in your power to redress the wrong you’ve done her.’

Hampton shook his head again, and grinned tautly. ‘Then I’m afraid I’m not generously overstocked in “decency” as you define it, old fellow, if that means letting you people force me into some totally unsuitable alliance –’

‘Unsuitable?’ By now Van Elliott could barely speak at all around the fury binding his throat.

Hampton spread his hands and gave them all a chilled smile of condescending disdain. ‘I feel no sense of responsibility here. . . . Your daughter may have acted foolishly, riding out unaccompanied with me. I did not force her. It was her choice, her mother’s decision. In some way, I may be accountable for staying so long, but certainly in no way responsible for any damage done her reputation –’

‘You, sir – and you alone have compromised her reputation,’ the judge said.

Hampton shrugged. He smiled in a brassy way. ‘Perhaps. If true, it’s unfortunate. I admit this. But if her reputation is so fragile it can be smashed by one small misstep, I’m afraid I must ask you people to be sensible and not be carried away by your emotions. . . . There is, after all, no sense in ruining all our lives, is there?’

He turned as if leaving, by birth and ingrained habit taught to make his disorder and leave it for others to rearrange. Van Elliott caught his arm. ‘Ruin? Our lives? Ruin all our lives, sir? Are only you to walk away from this ugliness unscathed?’

Hampton shook Van Elliott’s hand from his arm. ‘I’m sure you’re all simply overwrought. We’ll hardly settle anything by discussing it under such conditions. Eh?’ He walked to his carriage. He turned and bowed to them, mockingly. ‘I bid you all – goodnight . . . and goodbye . . .’

All this time Lizabeth had stood silent and unmoving.

She stared at them as if they were strangers in some unreal confrontation which did not even concern her.

She watched Hampton swing lithely up to the boot of his carriage. He slapped the reins and the horse responded, moving sharply away along the circular drive.

Lizabeth sagged against the column and watched Hampton Gates drive away into the night. Coldly, she told herself she was not even surprised. Deep inside she'd known all along that no matter what she'd done for him, this was the way it would end between them. . . .

Before Hampton Gates had driven ten yards from the house, Van Elliott ran up the steps and across the porch. The screen door whined open and slammed shut behind him.

Almost at once the greying man reappeared, carrying a handgun at his side. Nettie said weakly, 'Van Elliott, please . . .'

He did not even glance toward her and she said nothing more. Lizabeth remained pressed against the column, her face rigid and pale. She did not speak.

Van Elliott strode down the steps. He swung up into the saddle with the agility of a man half his age. He jerked the horse's head around and rode in swift pursuit of young Gates in the phaeton.

When he came out of his drive, Van Elliott saw Gates headed downtown on the dark street. At the sound of racing hooves, the youth glanced negligently over his shoulder. He glimpsed the incensed rider behind him in the shadowed dark. Smiling faintly, he touched the lines almost daintily in a snapping motion across the rump of his trotting horse.

Gates pulled his buggy into the curb before the Senate Chambers on Adams Street. The saloon was loud and crowded at this hour. Gates glanced once more along the late-evening thoroughfare and then swung down. Indolently, taking his time he secured his horse at the long leather-slicked hitching post.

As he straightened and turned to cross the lighted walk, Van Elliott Hayward rode in to the hitching post. Holding the gun in one hand and fixed on young Gates, Hayward swung down, tossed his lines over a hitch-ring.

Face cold and hard, but twisted with a faintly supercilious smile, Hampton paused, waiting. He seemed only barely aware of the weapon in the judge's hand.

Van Elliott advanced upon him. He was barely able to speak. He felt as if his heart had slipped and would fail him at any step. 'I'm not going to let you get away with this evil, Gates. You have ruined my teenage daughter.'

Gates swung his arm in a cutting gesture of dismissal. 'Go on home, old man, and sleep it off.'

Hayward stepped closer. 'Obviously, you fail to understand – perhaps you don't care – my daughter is under age.'

'Oh, hell, Hayward. I don't like to say this, but she's baggage. I do know that. She's baggage. And you know she's baggage. This whole town knows she's baggage. . . . But there's one thing more I also know, old fellow. I know you won't foist your baggage off on me.'

Each insolent word was like spittal in the judge's face. He gasped and retreated without physically moving at all, shrivelling into himself. He dealt often with ignorant louts in his courtroom but he had never encountered a person of such arrogance and disdain for other human beings. His voice choked with tears of outrage. 'I've come – hoping even now – to be reasonable –'

'With a gun in your hand? You want to be reasonable, old son? Then be reasonable. Go on home.'

'– I'll give you an alternative to this gun, boy. You agree to marry my daughter – or be killed on this spot.'

Gates laughed at him. 'You're sick and upset, old man. Out of your mind. A lawyer. A judge. A supreme court justice – waving a gun on a public street – threatening to kill.'

'I will kill you. I don't care about the rest of it. I will kill you. You are vermin and I will kill you.'

'If I'm vermin, I'm nothing you'd want in your family, you stupid old son of a bitch.' Gates stepped forward, grinning coldly. Van Elliott jerked the gun up between them. Hampton, still ignoring the weapon, struck the older man first in the right temple, then in the left, with the raised knuckle of his third finger slightly extended.

The judge staggered. Hampton took the gun from his hand. He turned and smashed it on the water trough. He threw the broken pieces behind him.

By now men were spilling out of the saloon. Others gathered from the dark crannies of the night street.

Coldly, adding insult to fearful injury, Gates opened his hand and slapped Hayward back and forth across the face. He kept slapping him with the flat of his palms until the little man wavered helplessly and sank to his knees. He crouched there on the walk, his head bowed between his arms.

Gates glanced around at the cold and irate faces of the men in the saloon doorway. Then he turned and got into his buggy. He swung it around and drove unhurriedly out of town.

IX

The hour of the wedding ceremony arrived at last.

The frantic bride had to be sedated with a spoonful of diluted laudanum, prescribed by a troubled Dr Lintner. She could confess to no one that this moment in the church had become in her mind an impossible achievement, a distant grail and a forlorn hope at best. She had not believed Maston Devereau could live in the same city with Hampton Gates and his friends and cronies and not be turned away from her in repugnance. Every hour of every sombre snail-paced day she'd expected to have Maston come searching for her. She could almost mouth the words she was sickly certain he would say: 'I'm sorry. . . . I'm very sorry . . . It's all off . . . and I'm sorry.'

These days passed in an uproar of frenetic confusion and disarray. The girls financially able to make the trip arrived from as far away as Mobile or Jacksonville. Pampered darlings of those families still valiantly pretending there was normal existence left, that the world had not crumbled around them, that life did go on, however raggedly. The wedding rehearsal added a kind of subdued hysteria. The house fermented in chaos, overrun with bright and laughing and demanding guests. Judge Hayward remained stunned, in an agonized condition of despair, a state of disbelief; he found the safe secure world he'd always believed in, trusted and voted obediently, to be base and vile and unhinged. Still, for Lizabeth's sake, he smiled and said over and over how proud he was. And Nettie, tight-lipped, drawn, silently anticipated the worst. In *her* waking nightmare, she saw the pleasant company gathered smiling in their pews, the church crowded and fragrant, and the absent groom sending his regrets. She did not speak any of this; she kept it all inside her and she smiled, gracious and warm, all the while screaming her terror deep inside where no one could hear. *Oh, God, just let them get married. Just let them get married.*

Guests arrived from all over the beleaguered state, many soldiers and disabled veterans among them – men who when whole had loved and coveted Lizabeth with whole hearts and who now, crippled and unworthy, hid their loss like some guilty secret. The last moments simmered to a fevered pitch, with a thousand things which could go wrong, and none that did.

Then in her crowded bedroom, crinkling with crinoline, hazy with powders and pungent with colognes, Lizabeth was bundled into her laces and veils and silks and hustled off to the church.

A solemn hush settled over the crowded pews of the flowered temple. The organist struck up the wedding march. Moving to the sadly elating music, the maid of honour – a Miss Terrence Lee Bagley of Jacksonville – her smile demure and dimpled, her lovely blonde head tilted,

followed the bride down the carpeted aisle. All the whispers confirmed it – it was a beautiful ceremony. It couldn't have been more elegant in the best of times. The bride never looked lovelier – and this meant beauty that was heartbreaking. In her sublime self confidence, she'd surrounded herself with other exotic beauties, like expensive flowers in a bouquet, each one more alluring than the last.

With trembling fingers on her father's arm – and for no good reason suddenly aware that she was as tall as he – Lizabeth glided to the altar and stepped in close beside Maston. He glanced down at her veiled face and smiled faintly.

Lizabeth felt her throat choke with unshed tears. She still did not know why he was here. She gazed at him in the soft wash of candlelight. For the very first time, she saw deeply into him, the vulnerable eyes, the sombre and haunted smile. She understood somehow that whether he loved her as deeply as he professed, he was lonely, alone, and even terrified of loneliness. He needed someone, whether it was she or not, he needed to give his love and to be loved in return. It was that darkness of lonely hours before dawn that he dreaded to face alone. For whatever reason, he did want to marry her, and she thanked the gods for this. And for reasons unclear to her, but strong and real and sufficient for him, he wanted *her*. She could almost believe it would all work out for them, even yet.

Dimly, she heard the minister's mellifluous voice, but not any of his words. Suddenly, he was speaking to her. She nodded her head and tears streamed down her cheeks. She felt hysteria boiling inside her. Her voice was so choked, her throat so taut, she could barely say, 'I do ...'

Lizabeth watched Hampton Gates move towards her along the receiving line. In the fragrant, overcrowded hall, loud with laughter and warm chatter, she felt a desperate chill of terror and loneliness. She had the horrifying sensation that she was about to be exposed, naked, before all these people

in some foredoomed nightmare beyond her control.

She could feel the eyes of the other guests upon her like talons. She recognized the faint smiles, the slight nods, the twisted mouths, the knowing glances.

Long before she was ready, Hampton stood before her, tall, slender, petulantly handsome, smiling in that blandly egregious manner.

'Beautiful wedding,' Hampton said. His eyes burned into hers. 'Event of the season.'

Lizabeth extended her hand, but Hampton smoothly caught her arms and kissed her lightly on her cheek. The gesture was nothing anyone could criticize and yet Lizabeth shuddered with fury. That condescending leer twisting his pretty face made her ill.

Damn him. He was laughing at her, at her marriage, at Maston, her father, at everyone gathered in this place. He looked as if he raged with laughter inside. Lizabeth held herself rigid, face chilled, with eyes that had learned inscrutability in the cradle.

She drew a deep breath waiting for Hampton to move on. By now, she was reconciled to the way Hampton had treated her like a slut that night in the pigtracks; she'd behaved like a hussy; he had responded in kind; he had taken what he wanted, what she threw at him.

She no longer deceived herself about any of that. Hampton had set out to get what he wanted, to take advantage of her inexperience, her obsessive ambitions and her hotly aroused emotions, aroused as much by the smell of his wealth as by the musk of his body. This encounter she now saw as far less than unequal. She'd wanted something desperately. She'd wanted to belong in Gates' rarified world of the very elite, as a part of it, as a legal part. She'd undoubtedly desired this achievement far more even than he'd coveted her body. The need with him was transient, she saw now. If he hadn't gotten her, he would likely have paid for relief in some whore's crib and been content the next morning. But with her that drive to rise to the elitest apex of her world was more than wish or dream, or

ambition. She admitted it was obsession. As coldly as he planned to take her, she considered her own options and permitted him to do what he wished as if she'd been overwhelmed, defenceless against his charm. The truth was in there somewhere, but not in her vulnerability. Coolly and calculatingly, she had determined at his first display of craving that she wanted him too. She had been willing to gamble her body, or anything else, to entice him, grab and hold him.

She remembered the way he'd whispered, as if choked on the emotion packed in the words themselves, 'I've never wanted anyone so much.' She knew now that he'd been truthful. He had wanted her above all else – in that moment. She had believed him, for only one reason: she had wanted to believe, she'd needed to believe, she was driven by her own ambition to believe. And what was there to doubt? They were a matched pair – two beautiful people. She *was* lovely. He would find no one lovelier. And she was supremely confident in her youthful charms. She'd been a fool, that was all, a goddamned fool . . .

Hampton was shaking hands with Maston. Beside Maston, Hampton looked far less than masculine, self-indulgent, spoiled and soft. He was speaking with a bright, wide smile that Lizabeth recognized in all its falsity. 'I was deeply enamoured of your wife, Doctor.' He gave a slight shrug. 'But, of course, I wasn't the only one. Every male in the area is in my anguished condition.'

Maston merely smiled, but Lizabeth spoke. She said, 'Hampton, dear, may you itch in the tightest hole in hell.' She murmured the words, wearing a warm polite smile like a painted mask.

Hampton gave a short burst of laughter that brought all gazes upon them. He stared down into her face as if Maston were not there, as if they were alone in the room.

'How cruel you are, Lizabeth.' His tone matched hers for civility. 'You know you've broken my heart. You've left me – for a far better man I'm sure – but you've left me no peace of mind.' He turned his smile back upon Maston. 'We must

get together again. Soon.' His gaze moved back to her. He was not asking her. The bold, taunting look in his eyes was telling her how it must be.

'Let us get in touch with you,' she said in a devastating cold tone of politest dismissal. She stared at him but her eyes faded down, as lamplight does when the wick fails.

Trembling inside, but pallid face expressionless, Lizabeth watched as Hampton heeled around and walked away ignoring the others in the receiving line.

They arrived at Wakullah Springs long after dark in a savage rainstorm. Everything conspired against them from the moment they led a shouting, laughing parade from church to train station. They were still brushing rice from hair and clothing long after the narrow-gauge train started south from Tallahassee. The torrential rains struck almost at once. Maston left Lizabeth huddled, chilled and damp in the small and drafty Wakullah village depot while he hunted the town livery stables in a blinding downpour.

He rented a single-seat buggy with oil-cloth curtains and opaqueising-glass panes. The hostler recommended that they spend the night in the settlement, rooms at a large house where lodgers were accepted. But since it was under three miles to the resort hotel, Maston decided to risk the trip. 'Long road. Swampy. Bad three miles,' the stableowner warned.

Darkness closed in swiftly and visibility was poor to negligible. Rain blew in around the makeshift windshield and seeped through the seams of the curtains. Lizabeth trembled with cold by the time they drove into the darkened grounds at the Springs hotel.

The incredibly clear water – with objects plainly visible a hundred feet down in limestone caves – of the four-acre spring had made the place a popular spa. The war had isolated and depressed the resort. Few lights burned in the old frame hotel above the clear mist-covered basin.

A fire was set in the fireplace of a large suite. It soon blazed orange, yellow and green, crackling in the damp

wood. Maston placed Elizabeth as closely to the hearth as possible, wrapped her in thick, sweet-smelling hotel blankets. He served her hot toddies and sat watching her.

Smiling faintly, he studied her leaning against the squat-legged ottoman and swaddled in blankets. The fire glittered yellowly across her face. He grinned compassionately. 'I know you're tired,' he said.

Elizabeth lifted those violet eyes and fixed them upon him. She felt her heart stumble and then quicken. She felt as if she were truly seeing Maston for the very first time. She saw him as he had urged those nervous carriage horses through the swamp storm, the way he had swung her up into his arms and run with her up the wide stone steps of the old hotel. Was she in love with him? Was she beginning to fall in love, she who had never truly loved anyone? Her breath quickened. She lowered her eyes, flirting with him, and gave him a faint smile. 'I am tired . . . Not too tired to go to bed.'

Maston laughed. 'You've talked me into it, you silver-tongued charmer you.'

He sank beside her on the pile of blankets. She came close into his arms. She felt abruptly overheated, in a way that had nothing to do with the roaring fire across that hearth, fevered. It was as if she were with her first lover, and suddenly, sickly, she found herself wishing this were true. Devoutly, she wished Maston Devereau had been first with her; he could be all she would ever want. She knew this in that fiery moment. Her throat closed, taut, and she was caught between empty laughter and helpless tears.

He gathered her up, blankets and all and carried her along the wide dark hallway to their suite overlooking the night-black spring. Hotel employees watched and smiled indulgently. Honeymooners were not new to them, but these two people were ideally beautiful. They looked as if they should be in love, as if they belonged together. One experienced a faint sense of warmth, watching them, as if maybe things were not really too bad in this fouled-up world.

Lizabeth luxuriated in a steaming hot bath and then, exuding her favourite cologne from warm, open pores, she slipped into a laced gown and translucent robe. When she came out of the dressing room, hotel waiters served dinner in their room. They ate little of the meal. Lizabeth had been ravenously hungry on the long drive out from Wakullah village. She was suddenly afraid she would be ill if she ate anything at all. She sat idly picking at the savory roast lamb, the crusty round little new potatoes, green peas. She'd recovered from the chill and dampness, but now she was taut drawn, ill at ease, in the large and silent old room.

Covertly, she watched Maston. Doctor Devereau. Her husband. How odd. Incredible. This stranger? This man she barely knew? This unknown outsider whom she found suddenly so fascinating? Was this falling in love? Is this the way women fall in love? How would she know, she who had been in love all her life but had never loved before? How could she know?

'I wonder if I'm falling in love with you?' she said.

He glanced up, smiling. 'Wouldn't that be nice?'

'I feel I hardly know you.'

'You don't know me.'

'Tell me about you.'

She saw him wince, a faint quick shadow darting darkly across his face, suddenly gone. He shrugged. 'Nothing to tell. Not on a wedding night . . . Anyway, not while we're eating.'

She spoke in a very serious tone. 'You look like someone I'd like very much to know.'

Maston met her gaze but did not smile. 'Do you need time, Lizabeth?'

She blushed, her face burning. 'I didn't mean that . . . No . . . I'm not afraid of you, if that's what you mean. I'm not one of those prudish, simpering little hypocrites.'

'I'm sure you're not.'

Her head jerked up. She searched his face, looking for veiled accusation. She found only his gentle smiling, his

extraordinary good looks and innate kindness. My God, she thought, God is good to me when I've no right to expect good at all. 'You're a very pretty fellow,' she said.

'So are you.'

'But you make me all excited – inside.' She felt as if she needed to tell him, that he had married her and deserved to know. 'You stir me all up – as nobody else ever has.'

'All the girls tell me that.'

'Yes. But God help me, I mean it.'

'Are you trying to talk me into bed?'

'I thought you'd never ask.'

Grinning, but without speaking, Maston pushed the serving cart out into the corridor and locked the door against the world and intruders. He went slowly about the room extinguishing the lamps and tall, sweating candles until the large square room was illuminated only by firelight.

He came back to her. She watched him, sloe-eyed, unmoving. He knelt beside her and kissed her. 'I don't feel like I'm on my honeymoon,' she whispered. 'I feel all tingly – like I'm on my first prom.'

She slipped her arms about his neck and locked them. Still kissing her, Maston levered her up in his arms and sank with her upon the deep, goosedown mattress.

Lizabeth clung to him. 'Oh God, Maston,' she whispered against his mouth. 'I hope I can be good for you. I want to be. I want to be.'

Kissing her face and throat, fondling her breasts and armpits and hips, Maston effortlessly slipped off her robe and gown. She lay naked across the glitteringly white sheet. She reached up and stroked the sides of his face with heated palms. 'My God, Doctor,' she whispered. 'What a sensational bedside manner.'

He lay beside her, moving his hands over her throat, the full breasts, the rise at her belly, the fevered heat steamy at her thighs. It was some moments before Lizabeth realized that Maston had gone tense, as if he'd stopped breathing. He was chilled and withdrawn, though his hands still moved

over her.

'What's the matter?' she whispered. A sense of total helplessness washed over her. Distantly, lightning flared and thunder crackled, remote and lost in the dark night. Something inside her clenched up tightly, like an unrelenting fist, cutting off her breath.

Her husband's voice was the voice of a stranger. 'I think you know.'

She struggled. 'Maston. I don't know. You – started making love to me . . . Suddenly you aren't making love to me at all.'

His voice sounded muffled, as distant as the departing thunder. 'Sorry. I'm only a poor lover at best – part time – but lover or not, I'm a medic first. I can't help that.'

She tried to twist away. 'What are you talking about?'

He forced her to lie still. With his left hand he forced her legs spread wide apart. For a long breathless time, while she felt suffocated, he probed at her vagina with impersonal fingers.

At last, he spoke in a dead empty tone. 'You're pregnant . . . you're several months pregnant.'

X

The old Seth Thomas grandfather clock in the downstairs foyer chimed forlornly three times, a remote tolling of another dark and sleepless hour before dawn.

She heard Maston come in from the barn across the darkened kitchen in the stunned silence. Jim Watkins had lain awake awaiting the doctor's return from another nightcall somewhere in the backcountry.

She went on standing at the window. She stared unseeingly at the shadowed night. She felt drained and empty. For the first time in her indulged and pampered life she knew what it was to look ahead without hope.

She shuddered faintly. She'd barely known Maston when they were so ostentatiously wed. She hadn't really known

him at all. He'd been a straw and, drowning, she'd grasped at him, thinking only to save herself in that moment. Maston Devereau had offered her a new chance. Only, it turned out, she'd gone merely from one cold and empty room in hell to another.

They'd been married nearly two months now. She knew him little better than she had that day at the altar. They lived together like polite strangers. God knew, this wasn't what she wanted. It added to her agony to realize now that she had begun to fall in love with him that first day in the church and on that wet and arduous odyssey to Wakullah. She had been flattered by his quiet devotion; she'd felt herself responding sincerely to his inner warmth, his solid, lean strength. She'd found herself intrigued and excited by his touch, by the seething promise that he would be a tireless and passionate lover, an ideal husband. No one could be handsomer, more attentive, more attractive.

She shivered, claspng her arms across her breasts. She admitted she was falling in love – truly in love – for the first time in her empty and frivolous existence – and that, incredibly, her lover was her own husband . . . this ardent stranger.

She heard Maston trudge tiredly along the lamp-lit upper hallway. She crossed her room and opened her corridor door.

With hand on knob of his own bedroom door, Maston paused, caught his breath – impatiently? – and glanced toward her.

'You were very late,' she said.

Maston shrugged. 'One of the Taggart kids. Scarlet fever. I had to isolate him in a tack room of their barn. It could be fatal. It could wipe out the whole family.'

She sighed. She couldn't really care. Everybody knew the Taggarts were white trash. Six kids they could hardly feed on a subsistence farm. 'I waited up for you.'

'That was kind of you.'

'I didn't do it to be kind.'

'Oh, I'm sure you didn't.'

She winced at the fatigued sarcasm in his quiet voice. 'Do you hate me so terribly, Maston?'

He shrugged again. 'Except for wondering vaguely why you were born at all, what you are really all about, no, I don't hate you. I'm married to you. I'm trying to live with it, Elizabeth. I'm trying to shut out the rest of it. Don't ask too much of me.'

Her head tilted slightly. She could not help being defiant, even if she were totally in the wrong. She'd been born prideful, unbending, and she couldn't help that, either. 'I ask nothing of you,' she said. 'I wronged you. I regret it. I'm deeply ashamed. Sorry. I'd like to make it up to you.'

'I realize all that. I understand. But I'm afraid it's not that easy.'

Her voice tightened. 'Then if you knew that, why didn't you walk out . . . that first night?'

'God knows I wanted to.'

She stared at him, unrelenting. 'And all the days since then?'

'Because nothing's changed. Whatever you are, I am what I am, too . . . I am not about to cast the first stone . . . But that doesn't make it any easier. I still have to learn to live with what I know about you.'

'And you haven't figured out how to do that yet?'

'Not yet.'

'It looks like there isn't much choice. You either accept me – warts and all – or you walk out. If you don't walk out – unless you are keeping me imprisoned in some kind of ancient punishment – then you ought to let me try to make it up to you.'

'Make it up to me . . . How would you do that?'

She spread her hands, her eyes glittering in the lamplight. 'You asked me to marry you. You must have felt something for me . . . I thought you loved me. I hoped you loved me . . . I knew – when you found out – the truth, you'd be enraged, justifiably. . . . But I hoped, if you loved me, as you said, you'd let me admit my wrong – my grievous wrong – and make it up to you somehow.'

'But you couldn't bring yourself to tell me that truth – ahead of time?'

'Maybe you've never been desperate. I hope you never are. God knows. I hope you never are. I was desperate . . . I wanted to tell you. . . . I knew I had to tell you. I just didn't have the courage. And I kept hoping – after you said you loved me – truly, deeply – after you asked me to marry you – I hoped you meant it.'

Maston smiled tautly. 'Didn't you wonder at all about the limits of my love? Didn't you bother to ask how much I loved you? Whether my love – or anybody's love – could withstand the shock of learning you carry another man's child?'

'I hoped. I told you. I was desperate. Desperate people must hope desperately. . . . But I tried to be truthful with you – as truthful as I could. I did try to warn you away, Maston, I did. I even refused to see you that same day Dr Lintner told me I was pregnant. . . . I tried to stop seeing you. I meant never to see you again.'

'Only you didn't say that, did you?'

'I couldn't . . . I said all I could . . . I gave you your chance to be free of me, Maston. I did . . . Then – when you swore you loved me – I began to hope inside – in my desperation . . . I prayed we could make it work – somehow make it work.'

'I realize all that.'

'I know it isn't easy for you. How ugly and vile and low you must think me. I knew from the first it wouldn't be easy – and all I've learned is that it is impossible. I can't go on like this . . . I just want to know what you want to do.'

He shook his head, his wide shoulders sagging. 'I don't know. I need time – if we're going to make it.'

'To go on – like this?'

'Have you any better ideas?'

'Anything is better. This isn't living. This isn't even existing. This is hell. Hell on earth. Maybe I deserve it, but I can't stand it . . . Abortion, Maston. You could perform an abortion. I don't want this child. I don't want it.'

His face was grey. 'It's far too late for abortion, Lizabeth . . . It was already too late on our wedding night – if I'd been willing to endanger you by permitting it.'

'Permitting it? You could have done it.'

He shook his head. 'Medical ethics, Lizabeth. I don't wonder you haven't heard of them when you haven't heard of any other kind. I could not have performed the abortion on you – even if I would have.'

'No one would ever know.'

'Jesus. Anything is all right – as long as no one knows . . . Well, there's no sense talking about it. It's out of the question. It's too late. It's all wrong. There's no sense talking about it.'

'But you won't talk about anything . . . We live like strangers. I can't do this, Maston. I won't live like this. I can't.'

'Looks like you must. Just as I do.'

'We could get a divorce.'

He laughed. 'A divorce and bury your parents. And ruin you. What would you have gained by entering this loveless union if you threw it away in an unheard of divorce? Women don't get divorces – and go on living in so-called polite society, they don't.'

'I'd as soon be divorced – with all it means – as to go on living like this.'

He shoved his door slightly ajar. 'Well, I'm sorry as hell about that. But abortion is unthinkable. Divorce is impossible. That doesn't leave us many options.'

She shook her head, her hair bobbling about her shoulders. 'Are you willing to go on living like this?'

'Willing. Unwilling. Doesn't seem to have much to do with it. We've sort of made our bed, haven't we? Give me time, Lizabeth. . . . Let me make peace with myself.'

'Time? How much time?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, I can't do that, Maston. What do you want me to say? I confess. I made a mistake. A terrible, unforgivable mistake. I gave myself to – I thought he loved me. I wanted

him to love me – enough to marry me. I thought I could make him love me. I was a fool. . . . But that's the truth . . . That's all of it . . . When I said I'd marry you, I meant to make up all wrongs. I was willing to give my love – all my love – if I were loved in return.'

Maston exhaled heavily. The anger that he'd felt that first night at Wakullah Springs rushed back through him, rage intensified beyond anything he'd known in this past year, all the old rages he'd brought along down here with him, like madness and evil packed in his carpetbag. Rage against arrogance and injustice and mendacity. Now his revulsion centred on her. Pampered, spoiled, with barely a passing sense of right and wrong. Whatever mess she made all her life, someone cleaned it up for her. Whatever discord she plunged blithely into, she would be drawn safely out of it.

Damn it, she was what she was, just as he was what he was. He'd hoped to rebuild his life down here, with Lizabeth as the soul and meaning and shield against the past, and any people in that past. Looking at her almost roused him to hope again. He would forget the past, all of it, and everyone in it. Everyone. And he could fashion the good life for her that she envisioned.

'You can't just smash everything,' he heard himself saying, 'and expect it to repair itself as good as new over night.'

Lizabeth sighed. 'I can't go on like this, either . . . I know how you feel, Maston. I do. Truly. I asked too much of you. I am asking too much now. Whatever I've done, I'll just have to take the consequences, but I cannot go on like this.'

He winced and straightened. She had him there. He could hate her for what she had done to him. As she stood before him, splattered with that sick memory of a sordid affair and its tragic aftermath, and her unspeakable deception and betrayal, wasn't she totally despicable to him? Or was there some other equally strong memory haunting him? The rage and agony had been less painful

than the sense of desolation which had swept down through him at the thought of losing her, frail and amoral as she might be. The world around him loomed already empty, a silent cold void without her in it, despite his knowledge of her. He was torn between warring desire to strike her in the face with his fist and walking out on her and that forlorn need to stand – even then – between her and public disgrace and degradation. He was not at war with her. He was at war within himself, helpless against her, hating her as he loved and pitied her, and baffled by the conflicting emotions fermenting inside him.

In these past weeks, he'd thrown himself into his work, but even there found little peace of mind. He was still shackled to the truth about Lizabeth, his attraction to her, no matter how he fought it. If he were to live with himself, he had to resolve this terrible need and the numbing distraction of his rage against her.

'It takes time,' he said aloud.

'May I . . . come to bed with you?'

He caught his breath. 'Why would you want to do that?'

She spread her hands. 'We live – together – or we smash to smithereens . . . It seems that simple to me . . . That hopeful . . . That terrible. . . . What am I expected to do, Maston? Creep around, silent and shamed, thankful for a crumb? It's what I deserve. I grant you. More than I deserve. But I'm not like that . . . I can't live like that.'

An almost tangible aura of shared, if muted hostility, rather than fiery mutual desiring, permeated the candle-lit bedroom.

She lay naked on the goosedown mattress beside Maston. Her heart thudded irregularly. She did not try to give a name to her emotions. There was no way she could do that. She was too confused and nervous to feel anything constant except a mixture of fear and dread and misbegotten hope.

She thought again, almost forlornly, how handsome he was. Perhaps, perversely, because he was so lost to her, he

seemed more attractive than ever. She had been the sort of girl who'd thought she was in love with every personable new man she met. Now she admitted this was absurd. She hadn't loved any of them though she might belatedly wish she'd been kinder to some of those young victims so brutally maimed in battle. She'd blithely tossed her kisses around indiscriminately among those forgotten swains like buds from some impossibly inexhaustible bouquet. Shivering, she even wondered if she had anything left for this man whom she loved, at last truly loved, and wanted.

She let her half-closed eyes trace along his regular, sharp-hewn features. His eyes were large, well-set and as vulnerable as open windows. His forehead was straight and high, his nose finely chiselled, his mouth full-lipped and pleasant. Yet, even when he tried to smile, his face remained chilled. His laughter these days was slightly sarcastic, as if he laughed at himself and anything he once may have believed in.

She forced herself to smile, to make him see her smiling. She remembered his warmth, his gentle charm, his quiet strength. All that he truly was lay knotted inside him and she wanted to open him up to her again. She had to. Things were evil between them, she didn't deceive herself about that. But she was young and she brimmed with self confidence; she was totally certain of her own fresh and lovely young charms. She opened them to him now like some secret chest to delight and tempt him.

His hands moved on her, but dutifully and without passion. She wanted to cry out in protest but she lay as if frozen, silent and waiting. She had believed that if she could entice Maston to take her into his arms, into his bed, she would find with him what once she'd foolishly believed all men and women found together naturally as lovers, mates. Abruptly, though, she shivered with a terrible premonition of disaster. Dawn would not bring brilliant new and true happiness. It would only extend that terrible existence in which she now found herself trapped and condemned: a loveless marriage, an empty and cold alliance.

She shook away all negative thoughts and pressed closer against the heat of his lean, hard and bared young body. 'Kiss me,' she whispered. 'Don't you want to kiss me?'

She felt his slender body quiver slightly. She gripped his arms tightly. 'Don't be angry,' she pleaded. 'Right now, don't be angry.'

He kissed her, his lips cold. She trembled and caught her breath sharply, but for the moment said nothing. She saw in his pallid face how miserable he was. At last, she stroked his throat with the tips of her fingers and whispered, 'What's the matter? Please tell me.'

That faintly chilled and sarcastic tone raked her. 'Don't you get the feeling that – he's – in bed with us? Aren't you wondering whether you'll enjoy it with me – more or less than with him?'

'No. I'm not . . . I'm thinking about you. Only about you. I want us to be able to live together. I want us to be happy and I'm willing to do anything . . . anything to make it work . . . Can't you just try to – to give us a chance – that's all I ask, Maston . . . It's not very much . . . just give us a chance . . .'

'Yes.' He nodded, his face ashen. 'I know you're right . . . we can't go on like this. But maybe it's just no good. Maybe we don't have a chance. Maybe we never did.'

Her voice sounded odd, choked with unshed tears. 'It's all so sad,' she said. 'Sometimes I think maybe we were doomed. It didn't matter what we did. It's the times. Life itself is a hell. This terrible war, going so badly. All these sweet young boys maimed and killed and scarred and ruined. The world is crazy. Everything is insane . . . and we're part of it.'

He sighed. 'There's plenty of blame to share. Spread it around if you want to.'

'Don't you feel it – the insanity? The brutality. Inhumanity. It's as if all those beautiful young boys are being slaughtered – like animals – for nothing. . . . The wonderful quiet world we used to know. There aren't even any remnants of it. . . . Even in this old town. Untouched by

bombs or fire, it's as if we're all left alive in the ruins of that lovely world where things were good and right.'

'The world's gone insane all right.'

'Doesn't it frighten you and depress you? I cry when I think about it. All this insanity, the world going crazy around us, so we do crazy things to stay alive in it . . . none of this would have happened to us – in the ordinary normal world I remember.'

He exhaled tautly. 'We'd never even have met in that world.'

She felt him slipping away from her, and with his receding in his mind and heart, though he went on lying pressed close upon her, went their last hope of salvaging anything. But she would not surrender meekly. She could not.

She pressed herself closer, the heated outline of her thighs and bosom etched upon his body. She caught his hand and pressed it upon the fullness of her breasts. She closed her eyes and let her head sag against his shoulder. She felt his fingers close on her bared breasts, fondling the pink nipples until she bit her lips and gasped at the excitement radiating outward from them.

She caught his head in her hands and held his face close over her chest so he could nurse those swollen and rigid nipples. 'Oh God,' she whispered under her breath. 'Please God.'

Her head back, she stroked his muscled chest, the flat planes of his belly. She moved her hand downward boldly to his thighs, caressing and clinging and massaging.

She touched him at the crotch and gasped in anguished shock. He was not hard at all. His staff hung limp, flaccid. 'My God,' she said in agony. 'You don't want me.'

'I can't help it . . . I'm sorry.'

He tried to pull away, but she would not let him go. Shattered, chilled with rejection, she remained still unwilling to admit defeat. 'I can make it hard,' she promised, her breath hot against his throat. 'I can. I will.'

He caught at her head, but she writhed free, catlike, and

moved down upon him, dragging her tongue, like liquid fire, along his throat and across his chest. He twisted, but she clung to him tenaciously, with all her strength, her hot breath searing his skin. Her lips parted and she took his glans into her mouth, nuzzling, sucking, nursing, frantic in her need to arouse him.

She heard him moan and he fell away from her.

Her head jerked up, her eyes wet and wide, her face flushed, her hair wild about her cheeks, her lips bruised. 'What's wrong?' she cried. 'What's the matter?'

'Don't,' he said. 'Please don't.'

'Why not? I want to.'

'It's no good.' His eyes brimmed with tears of self-hatred. 'I'm no good . . . I know you're trying to save us – you're doing all you can –'

'I want to,' she said again. 'Truly. I want to.'

His head moved back and forth in anguish. 'I don't want to be cruel. God help me, maybe I'm crueller to myself even than to you. But I can't do this. Not now. Not tonight . . . Instead of going wild with what you're doing for me, I grow colder . . . I keep wondering where you learned to do this . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry.'

Breathless, icy cold, she pushed away from him. She stood up, snagging at her gown and robe upon the chair beside his bed.

He reached out for her, but she only withdrew, cold and lost. 'I won't bother you again,' she said. 'I don't know what I'll do, but I promise. I won't bother you again.'

XI

It was an acutely cold night. A ravening north wind skudded sullen clouds ahead of it across sooty skies, darkening the world and snarling, cold and ominous through empty streets. Despite the unaccustomed freeze, Walter-Tom McGee's saloon on Monroe glowed brilliantly, an isolated haven of warmth in the dismal evening.

Maston hurried into the bar room from the frost-blurred and oppressive chill of the night street. He thrust the heavy oak door shut behind him. He couldn't say precisely why he was here. He didn't want a drink. He didn't want to talk to anybody. Still, it was better than going home. In the glittering tavern, with the wind and cold sealed out, he found crowds of men, restless and sombrely agitated, yet strangely quiet, from one wall to another.

To his astonishment, the place seemed quieter than on an ordinary night. Yet these men were not silent at all, everyone appeared talking at once. What was lacking was laughter, boisterous shouting, even masculine challenges to fight with fists or knives or guns, bravado buoyed on beer. There was hubbub, disorder, even agitation, all the sound and fury, but it was muted, grave and grievous, without pleasure.

'Like an Irish wake in here,' Maston said to Walter-Tom McGee across the bar.

'Ain't you heard, Doc?'

'Haven't heard anything. Been on a house call. Out Taggart's creek.'

'The war's over, Doc. Lee's surrendered.'

Something grasped at Maston's heart, seizing it and crushing it as if in some massive fist. For a moment in the strange guttural commotion, he leaned against the bar. It was as if the numbing wind rushed in and froze his insides so he could never be warm again.

McGee pushed a glass and bottle across the wet reflecting bar. 'Pour for yourself, Doc. This ain't no night for measurin' a man's whiskey.'

Maston nodded, attempting to smile. He poured a drink, brimming the glass. McGee gave him an odd glance but said nothing. Gradually, Maston became aware of the rage and outrage, the impotent frustration and heartbreak seething around him. It was as if Grant's army had driven them back into this place, this last retreat. Veterans with empty sleeves and with legs shot away, with eye sockets forever gleaned by grapeshot, or with a jaw haphazardly rebuilt,

sagged, stunned, trying to find sense in what had ended so ignominiously, that which had been billed and sold and foisted upon them as glorious adventure.

Well, that glorious war had been fought to its preordained conclusion. These people had fought valiantly, gallantly and at a cost in human misery beyond reckoning and now, vanquished, they faced the dark night of defeat and occupation and retribution. They had been invaded, they had been beaten to their knees, starved, maimed and ruined, their homes had been destroyed and razed, their women raped, their lands overrun. And not even that had been hell. Hell, they now saw in sudden anguished lucidity, lay down the road ahead of them. Their gallant battalions were lined up in endless rows, marked white with crosses. Their returning troops slunk home, hungry-eyed, pellagra-bellied, silent and grey-faced.

They couldn't assimilate it yet. The impossible had come to pass, and abruptly they confronted only the ghosts, and the promises and the lies and the betrayals which were the only true quittance of any war. They read the furious hatred in faces around them, and the truth glittering at last in every eye. Now that it was too late, now that it was all over and beyond redress, they had known it all the time: there was never a moment when they could have won this war, and the hell of it was, the elite power structure behind it all must have known that. They'd never won anything but the battles, at costs they could never recover, and they submitted to attrition. Their fields and triumphal arches were trampled in dust and those loud bands playing Dixie were faded and silenced and gone. They'd never had a chance. Their leaders had lied to them, but they had believed that high-flown rhetoric because they had wanted to believe. They were on the side of right. And right made its own might, didn't it? They were defending their homes and their women and children, weren't they? Every man had to do that, didn't he – even if at last he saw the fight was not his and never had been?

They could not admit any of this, even to themselves.

They could only drink faster and talk louder, their defiance ringing hollowly against the thick uncaring walls.

Maston finished off the glass. He was unaccustomed to drinking, and could not tolerate alcohol anyhow. The room was already spinning. He took up the bottle and pushed through the crowds of men. He found a small table against a shadowed wall. He sat down and poured himself another drink.

After he finished off this second glass of whiskey, he found himself helpless against regrets and thoughts and needs he'd denied and repressed all these months. Frustration, dismay, the trickery of fate, the hell a man could make for himself, the weird aimless track of events, spun, loosed in his mind. Memories and moments and vagaries of the past rushed unreconciled back into his consciousness from which it had been so carefully barred. Flashes and whole vague scenes whirled and tumbled, unrestricted, uncensored, without any order except the unwavering forward thrust of pain.

Quickly, he sloshed more liquor into the glass and drank it down, trying to abort these nightmare apparitions dragging him back into savage, twisting labyrinths of the past. In this room around him, like disembodied shadows, men shouted. Voices roared in his ears, even distant whispers from half across the room.

'What you reckon them yankees mean to do now?'

'You don't have to worry none.'

'Why not?'

'Because you'll find out, toot sweet. Troops of occupation are moving in.'

'Yankee troops heah in Tally?'

'An' a Federal military governor.'

'Gawd almighty. What else them yankees want from us?'

'Blood from a turnip. They want more.'

'Jesus knows they ain't no more.'

'Hell they ain't. You'll see.'

'Leastways, we can all come home again.'

'Reckon that much is true. . . . We stuck it out. We

fought honourable. We can all go home. Prisoners. Refugees. Soldiers. Can all go home.'

'If'n we got anythin' left, we can go back home to it.'

Home. The word swirled and spun inside Maston's head. The fist clutching at his heart tightened. He gasped for breath and tears scalded his throat. He drank off another glass of whiskey. The liquor no longer even burned the membranes of his mouth. All he could think was, *the war was over and they could all go home. All except him. He couldn't go home. He could never go home again.*

He sagged in the shadowed chair, sick with distress and loss. *We stuck it out. We fought honourable. We can all go home.* He bit back a sob, deep in his throat. He had cut off any hope of his returning home as surely as an army surgeon lopped off a soldier's gangrous arm or leg. He was one of the war's truly mutilated, only his wounds didn't show. There was no way to know how foully he was disabled unless one looked deeply into his eyes, into his past, into that tragic and grievous wrong that haunted and doomed him, a crime against his fallen nation, his family, his own hope for happiness in a world now lost and forever forbidden to him.

Unable to shake off his helpless sense of melancholy and self-hatred, and blinded by sudden tears, he laid his head down on the table and wept. He wanted to stop crying but he could not. . . .

Maston was already gut-sick of the slaughter and blood-letting and mindless burning of the invaders before he reached Fort Gregg, late in October of 1864.

His class was hurried through its courses at Tulane, was graduated and subjected to brief internship in a civilian hospital and then conscripted into the Confederate Medical Corps as second lieutenants.

His orders assigned him to the hospital at Fort Gregg, near Petersburg Virginia. He was advised the entire area was under siege by 18,000 cavalry and infantry under Sheridan, but there was no way to suggest what was going

on up there. One had to see that for himself.

Maston set out from New Orleans in a single-seat buggy with his body-servant on the boot beside him. Jim hoped once they might go past the old home place to say goodbye to the folks, but Maston shook his head. 'It won't make it easier,' he said. 'Only harder on all of us. We'll go back. First leave we get.'

The first few days he drove briskly, wearing his new uniform with its bright braids and plumes. But by the time he reached the first outer rims of Sherman's devastation in Georgia, he slowed, sickness moiling in his belly. Jim Watkins vomited, lunging from the carriage and spewing out his insides. Maston held the horse quiet, waiting.

Finally, Jim crawled back up on the boot. 'I be all right now, Masta.'

'You don't have to go on, Jim. You can go back home to Blackoaks. You'll be all right there.'

'I be all right now, Masta. I belongs with you. I belongs to go where you go.'

Maston tried to shut out the ruin and destruction as he went north to Virginia. He drove in a kind of trance, looking homeward and remembering Marcella. What a beautiful name! What a beautiful girl. He needed no special stimuli to recall her face and form and radiance, but his uniform itself had come from her. Her older brother had ordered a half-dozen butternut uniforms tailored back in '61. Verne had been killed in the first days of the war. When Maston was drafted into the Medical Corps, Marcella had all Verne's uniforms, most of them fresh and untouched, altered to fit Maston. Every time he looked down at his military attire, he saw Marcella's proud smiling. They weren't formally engaged, but they were spoken. They had been in love since their fourteenth summer.

The hell of it was, his uniform set him apart from every soldier he met on the long trek north. Few enlisted men even wore shoes. Most were barefoot skeletons staggering along backroads to nowhere. A few gave him a faint salute and a strange despondent smile.

He felt the beginnings of panic, the first swirling of sickness stirring like troubled hornets deep in his belly.

Petersburg was a sombre town of 18,000 on the southern banks of the Appomatox River. The village was of little consequence to either the invaders or defenders except that it was the hub of the system of railroads which crisscrossed the South and connected Richmond to the supply centres.

Officers openly admitted that if only the army brass had been prudent and foresighted enough to provision the Confederate capital for a siege, Petersburg would long ago have been abandoned. But at no time in four years of war were full rations for even a fortnight ever accumulated in Richmond. Most often, there was less than three days supply in the army depot.

In June, Grant himself had visited Bermuda Hundreds and verified the importance of the railhead at Petersburg. Grant believed the town could be easily overrun and taken by an adequate force. All that summer and winter he hurled militia, heavy guns and mortar upon the defenders.

Arriving at Fort Gregg, Maston reported to the head of the medical staff. The officer wore a rough civilian coat with only his insignia, the stars of a colonelcy, on his shabby shoulders.

Maston winced, ashamed of the fresh, tailored quality of his own uniform. That night he removed it and never wore it again. He pinned lieutenant bars on his denim shirt collar and tried to look like the other medics.

The doctors all were Majors or Colonels and even Generals. But they were aged men, exhausted, empty-eyed and hollow. When they spoke at all, it was as if their tired voices came from deep inside an open rain-barrel.

The Colonel who signed Maston in extended his veined, skeletal hand. He tried to smile. 'I'm Devereau,' the Colonel said. 'Dr Clive Devereau. From New Orleans. Went to Tulane myself. Glad to have you here. Within Fort Gregg you'll find a mixed garrison from every extremity of the Confederacy. Virginians, Louisianians, Carolinians and Mississippians. All under the command of Captain

Chew of Maryland. A good man, suffering just now the agonies of advanced dysentery. But he works every day. We all do.' He did not even glance at Maston's travel orders. 'What's your name, son?'

'Maston, Sir. Maston Baynard. I'm from around Mt Zion, Alabama. My father was a senator – one of the last delegation in the U.S. Senate from Alabama. You may have known him.'

Devereau shook his head, barely listening. 'Well, I can see you've come decked out for a glorious war, Lieutenant. I warn you now. There is no such thing as a glorious war. Maybe there never has been, sure as hell this one isn't. Maybe when knights and lords and kings actually rode out themselves to fight their own battles. May have been a little glory in that, I don't know. But knights and lords and kings don't fight personally for what they covet any more. They lie to their people, using words like crusade and holy cause and patriotism and making the world safe. And ordinary people are no more than their cannon fodder – before the battle, during it, and afterward – if they survive. These foot-sloggers who face death for their greed-driven war lords have no rights. Not even the right to protest. Hell, you read about the draft riots in New York? Put down with militia and gunfire. Is there greater insanity than this, boy? If the people won't go willingly to slaughter and be slaughtered, the knights and kings and lords send their marshals who arrest and kill their own people! Glorious war. Glorious shit.'

From the moment Maston entered the operating room that day he never got a full night's sleep. He saw nothing but death, heads and arms and entrails blown away. He was unable to eat the mouldy food served at mess, and when he ate he vomited.

So he thought about Marcella to escape the hell around him. When he had a few moments break, he sat at makeshift desks and with thunder of cannon reverberating in the very earth, he wrote on lined paper to Marcella and lied about how things were going. All his letters were lies,

lies that made him sick, except when he wrote that he loved her. God knew, this was no lie.

The siege of Petersburg had been going on for five months when Maston reached Fort Gregg. The region around the entrenchment was dense swamp and thick forests through which the Federals had to hack their way, an area slit by small creeks which emptied into Albemarle Sound. Confederate soldiers were posted behind earthworks and from those trenches daily came an unbroken flow of wounded and dying.

Maston felt the madness roiling inside him. He hated this death and dying and his own helplessness. He hated and despised the military and every mindless savage directing it. But he had only the end of the war and his return to Marcella to live for. He had to hang on. God knew, he loved Marcella, enough to endure hell for her. When this carnage ended, he was going home and they would be married. But suddenly, Mt Zion, Alabama, seemed light years away. Another world. Another time. In the midst of work, he choked back tears of sickness and loss and revulsion.

Exhausted, he felt as if he'd spent forty days and nights wandering hungry in some Biblical desert. He saw everything in a strange new light, a fascinating and horrifying clarity. At first he had no troubling consciousness of the war as a massive and mindless juggernaut of evil, for evil goals of greed, accomplishing incredible crimes against humanity. To stop such disloyal thinking, he concentrated on Marcella and that moment when the killing ended and he would return to her.

Victory or defeat were all the same to the medical corps at Fort Gregg, either translated into shattered bodies and blood smeared men they'd fight to keep alive when they saw them as better off dead.

As a matter of fact, Maston infrequently heard unverified rumours of Confederate victory along the lines. Forces under General Hill had struck Union battalions on their flanks, causing the northern troops to double back upon themselves and to retreat in confusion, with heavy

losses. But Hill's assault was costly in men and ammunition and it was eventually repelled by overwhelming numbers of Yankee troops. More than 4,000 men were killed, thousands more were transported to the hospital at Fort Gregg and the engagement ended in stalemate.

In this blood and carnage, his memory of Marcella dimmed. He could no longer summon the picture of her into his mind. Marcella. The lovely name of someone he once had known in a civilized existence far away and forever blasted to smithereens by army cannon. He tried desperately to recall her. Her blonde hair, her soft blue eyes, her slender body, her sweet-tasting lips. But she no longer seemed real at all.

Only the bloody wounded were real. The disembodied limbs. The guts spilled across the slippery, discoloured floors. He could no longer see Marcella's face at all. He felt bereft.

XII

Sometime in December of that year, Maston reached the end of his tether. When he looked back, he knew the madness had been building in him all those endless months of horror, brutality and stench of death. But it seemed to him the moment he had to struggle inside himself to keep from killing an orderly, he had taken that first step beyond sanity, out over the precipice from which there was no return.

He watched the dying come through his hospital and he was helpless to aid them; all the medics stood by helplessly, without supplies, without food or laudanum. There was no way to alleviate the agony of the dying wretches even for a little while. There were neither chloroform nor ether.

He stopped writing to Marcella. He never wrote home any more. There was too much blood and despair around him. He could not write to Marcella or his family at Blackoaks unless he wrote the truth, a truth that would

burden and hurt them. And he could not write lies. Not any more.

Sometimes letters came from Marcella across tortuous winding ways. Not even the faint scent of her remained upon them by the time they were delivered. He reread those letters a dozen times, trying to find the strength to endure in them, the reason, but they were like polite words from a casual stranger.

Even when she wrote that there had been no letters from him for months, it seemed unimportant, like a bad joke. It didn't really matter. He had written. Almost every day. He wrote letters to Marcella and chunked them into the maw, the bloody maw.

Sometimes late at night, in the chilled darkness before dawn, when he walked out of the operating room into the silence of the fort, he thought how easy it would be to walk out into that black night and keep walking, to face whatever awaited him out there. How simple and final and irreversible. If he deserted he could never go home again, even if he lived. And yet, if he stayed in this insanity, he would end up in leather restraints, and there was no way back from that madness, either.

He decided that maybe if he could get away just long enough to regain his sanity, it would be all right, he could make it then. If he got away from pain and death and blood and filth. All he wanted was to get away for a little while, get back to Marcella, away from this savagery, from blood splattered walls and empty medical shelves and men who died in agony so exquisite they could no longer even cry out against it.

But he knew better. There was no way out for him.

He stood staring at the starless sky, the black dome behind which the gods themselves hid their shamed faces. He wanted Marcella. God, how he needed to see her, to be with her, all this over and done with.

He felt a surge of strength, the terrible inner urging to run away, but he resisted. If he ran away, he could never see Marcella again. He'd be marked and branded and

ostracized for ever. Deserter. Slacker. Traitor. Coward. If he ran, he could be free of this madness, but he could never turn back. He'd better keep that always in the front of his mind. There was no way back.

No. If he hoped to live to see Marcella again, he had to hang in here. Thinking about her might help to harden his resolve. God knew he needed help. He thought about Marcella and put everything else from his mind. She believed in goodness, in ideals, and bravery and courage and human decency which he now knew to be only empty words. There was no way he could make her understand how he felt about this brutal insanity. Not in a million years.

Desertion. Deserter.

This was a brand name for cowards and knaves and men who lived without rules or laws or responsibilities or obligations.

Men like me, Maston thought.

He finally reached that chilled night when he knew he was going over the wall, he was going to desert; it was only a matter of timing. There was nothing more he could do here, nothing he could do to relieve even the pain of the dying, and he could not look at them any more, either.

As the wintry days wore on, more reports of disastrous assaults by Union forces, resulting in losses of thousands of their dead, hundreds of prisoners who had to be cared for and fed when the southern troops were starving. One drive by Federal forces lost forty wagons and thirteen ambulances. But each Confederate victory was only a costly delay and finally ruinous. Destruction of the railroads around Petersburg was so thorough that months would be required for their repair. Yet the army ordered them repaired. Meanwhile, Lee wired President Davis that he had less than thirteen days rations for his army. Lee's commissary general was paying the market price for wheat still standing uncut or shocked, in the field. That market price was twenty Confederate dollars a bushel while the grain could be bought for one dollar in hard currency, gold

or silver. Late in December, Lee sent word to Davis that his men were without meat and most of them had not been paid for more than a year.

At Fort Gregg hospital, medical supplies could not be bought even for specie and could not be shipped in past Union lines anyhow.

In the hospital, empty-eyed doctors laughed over the latest yankee failure. Above Bermuda Hundreds, thousands of blacks had been pressed into service digging a canal off the James River through which Federalist generals hoped to send gunboats to assail the Confederates at Chapin's Bluff and thus open a forced passage to Richmond. On New Year's Day the last barrier to the canal was dynamited, but the earth fell back into the channel, leaving only a rivulet as product of eight months of labour under fire.

The doctors laughed, but Maston could not laugh. He could not even care.

As far as he was concerned, his own flash point came when he knelt over a wounded soldier in the long, crowded ward and almost fainted from the stench. Maston's voice raged in madness through the narrow cavern: 'Orderly.'

An exhausted soldier slogged toward him, a scarecrow of a man who had neither slept nor eaten in God alone knew how many hours, his beard bushed scabrous on his sunken cheeks. In the youth's eyes burned a wildness fired by fear, frustration and fatigue. 'Sir?'

'This man is covered with excrement, Orderly.'

'He shit hisself, sir.'

'I know that. Clean him up.'

'Why, sir? Why? He jes' shit hisself ag'in. I tole him. Yestiddy, I tole him. He shits hisself, he lays in it.'

'I'm ordering you, Orderly. Wash him down. Change his bedding.'

'Ain't no fuckin' change o' beddin' left, sir.'

'Clean him up.'

'He's a-dyin'. It don't matter that he dies all shitted.'

Eyes burning, Maston swung his arm. 'Goddamn you,

Orderly, we're all dying. But goddamn it, we die as decently as we can. I won't have these men dying smelling of shit.'

'He's got the dysentery, sir.'

'We've all got it.'

'Cain't no way stop him shittin' hisself – less'n you punch a bung up his asshole.'

'You do it.' Maston found himself shaking, his whole body quivering with rage. 'You clean him up, or so help me God, I'll kill you.'

Maston was barely conscious of where he was. He vaguely understood that he was at work with other doctors in the operating room. They were there when the Federals began final shelling of Fort Gregg.

This time it didn't take too long. Dr Clive Deverau was one of the first killed when a direct hit exploded in the hospital. Anyone who could move crawled, ran or stumbled for cover. But there was no cover. The fort was overrun.

Maston went on working. He helped the sick to safety in sandbagged parapets. He tied off wounds and set smashed bones. Around him people fell dead and he did not even see the carnage.

When Jim Watkins found him, they were two of the thirty who survived the Union shelling. Of the 250 defenders in the fort, thirty remained alive. Later, they would count 500 Federal soldiers killed or wounded, but of the assault, Grant himself said, 'The target was well worth the price. The cost was heavy, but it was worth it.'

Maston sent Jim to gather their belongings. But Jim returned quickly.

'Ain't nuthin' left over there at barracks, Masta. Reckon we lucky to be left livin' . . . they all daid over there.'

Maston nodded. 'All right. Then let's go.'

'Where us goin', Masta?'

Maston smiled. 'We're headed south, Jim.'

'We is? How far south is that, Masta?'

'How the hell do I know? South. So far south they don't

know my name or give a damn.'

'When we reckon to come back, Masta?'

Maston put his arm about his slave's shoulder. 'When hell freezes over, Jim. Or the day after. For sure.'

He plodded across the hard-packed earth, avoiding the great holes gouged by cannon fire. Jim walked warily in his wake. A sharp voice challenged, 'Who goes there?'

Jim stared at the soldier, the mindless private, holding the gun across his chest, guarding the shattered shell of a fort. 'Lt Maston Baynard,' Maston said. 'And body servant. The yankees are coming in here, boy. You better get to some kind of cover.'

The sentry stepped out into the vague light from remote flames. He wore no shoes. His uniform hung on him in tatters. He stunk with body odour and crawled with lice. His eyes glittered like flat panes in the windows of a vacated house. 'May I ax wheah-at you all is a-goin', suh?'

'It's all right, Sentry - '

'May I see yoah papers, suh?'

Maston winced. You poor bastard, he thought, don't make me have to kill you, a poor empty-headed soldier who knew nothing any more but to go on following orders, to walk his post.

'I don't have any papers, sentry. I'm a doctor. I'm on my way to treat ill and wounded.'

'Regret, suh. Cain't let you pass this command post without you got a written pass, suh. Them's my orders, suh.'

Finally, Maston nodded. He did not flinch or waver. He motioned Jim forward with his head. 'I'm going, Sentry. If you want to stop me, you'll have to shoot me.'

The sentry stared at him, those dead eyes wide. Maston stepped around him. 'Come along, Jim. We've got a long trip ahead.'

Trembling, the sentry stood with rifle poised. 'Don't do it, suh. Jesus Gawd knows I don't want to have to shoot you.'

Maston paused. He smiled across his shoulder. 'It's all

right, boy. There's no other way to stop me. You have your orders. I understand your orders. They're no more insane than you are. Or I am. Or this war.'

Weeping, the sentry jerked his gun against his shoulder. He shouted once more for them to stop. He pressed the trigger and the hammer fell on an empty chamber . . .

Five days later in Atlanta the stout-bellied banker unlocked the safe and took out the metal case which he handed over to Maston. With a brass key, Maston opened the deposit box. Gold pieces glittered in the light.

'Jesus Christ,' the banker whispered. 'Don't you know, Lieutenant, hoarding gold is a crime?'

Maston shrugged. He gestured and Jim shook open a small hemp poke and Maston dropped the gold eagles into it.

The banker's laboured breathing quickened. 'Had I suspected you had left gold in your safe-deposit box, Lieutenant, I'd of been obliged by law to turn it over to the Confederacy.'

'Thank your gods you didn't. For your own sake,' Maston said. He tied off the poke and holding the small bag at his side, he stood up.

'They's going to be people round askin' about this,' the banker said. 'It's going to take - maybe four or five hundred - to grease official palms and all before you'll be safe, Lieutenant. You'll find yourself in big trouble. Hoardin' gold.'

'I'm already in big trouble, I'm alive in the year of our lord, 1865.'

'Well, I can handle it for you, suh. You leave a few hundred with me, an' I ease it all out for you. Guarantee. If'n you don't, the Confederacy is certain to hunt you down for sure. . . . Likely you deserted, too . . . May take as much as half the gold in that poke to buy the kind of silence you need.'

Maston suddenly gripped the man by the shirt front. 'I'll let you live. That's my gift to you. When I'm gone, you yell

your fat head off. But when you do, pray they get me – and that they get me before I can get back here to you. If they don't get me, I'll kill you – and you can gamble your last confederate dollar on that.'

They crossed into Florida and made their way west on board roadways to Lake City. Here, Maston took Jim's hand in his. He gestured toward a road twisting north. 'You're free, Jim, Lincoln has freed the slaves, you know.'

'Ah's heard that, Masta.'

'Then go. I give you your freedom if you want to hear it from me.'

Jim shrugged. 'I do knows you a mite better than I knows President Lincoln, Masta.'

'I'm not your master any more. You can make your own life down here in Florida, Jim.'

'Reckon I'll just stay on with you a while, Masta Doc.'

'I'm not going back home to Blackoaks, Jim. Not now. Not ever.'

'Ah understan's about that too, suh. I knows youah troubles and I understands them. Ah figured you might not be going back home. I sorry about that. Deep sorry. But I understand.'

'I wish to God I did . . . I can't pay you anything for a while.'

Jim shrugged again. 'We eats pretty well, Masta.'

'Sure. Bread three dollars a loaf. Confederate money.'

'My needs ain't pressin', Masta.'

Maston laughed. 'That's funny, mine sure as hell are.'

Jim Watkins smiled faintly. 'That's just 'cause you ain't learned yet to live without – and I was borned knowin' that. . . .'

They rode at last into the seven hills of Tallahassee. Nobody asked any questions of Maston and he offered no information. He opened an office downtown and signed a lease.

The realtor smiled broadly. 'I want to welcome you to

Tallahassee, Doc. We need a fine new young medic like you. I vow you'll do well here. By the way what's your name, suh?'

Maston didn't hesitate. He turned from where he was hanging his defaced medical degree in a cheap wooden frame. 'My name's Devereau,' Maston said. 'It's there on the lease. Dr Maston B. Devereau.'

XIII

The effects of the three glasses of whiskey he'd gulped down must have worn off, Maston decided. He sat, tremblingly lucid, against the shadowed wall at his solitary table, the saloon loud around him, the shouts and laughter hollow and ringing strangely in his ears. His stomach muscles felt knotted, like wire snarled and twisted and drawn taut ready to snap. None of these men could ever really know how this moment hit him, what it meant to him, how it desolated him. Some of them had lost legs and arms, or brothers, but he had lost everything, including his last shred of self-respect. His wounds didn't show, but hell knew they went deep – and they were all self-inflicted. He'd ended up in hell, but he'd brought it all on himself, every step of the way. He'd bolted under fire. Others had hung on, but he'd thrown honour and pride and courage into that bloody maw, and they were gone and he could never reclaim them. It was hell to sober up and see yourself for what you really were. The night, the world, the future, all looked sour and evil and hopeless, and better than you deserved.

He needed a drink; he needed it badly and quickly. He reached out for the bottle, misjudged the distance, knocked it over and watched in helpless fascination as the liquid spilled, running across the table and splashing on the floor. He was aware of amusedly contemptuous gazes touching at him and other eyes watching him intently, the laughter splattering him like thrown cowdung.

Well, he needed a bottle, that was all. He'd be all right as soon as he crossed the room to the bar and ordered another bottle of bourbon. Bourbon was the answer. It was the only answer. It was the hope of mankind. And kindly God knew he couldn't stand to be sober like this.

It was not as easy to get to his feet as he'd supposed it would be. His nerve centres sent out the correct messages but something happened on the way from the forum. He finally had to set his legs apart, stiffen his knees and then lever himself to his feet by bracing the flat of his hands against the wall.

When he stood up, the room careened and wheeled and skidded around him. He grabbed out wildly, knocked over his table and upset his chair. He clutched at the wall, but it spun crazily out of his reach.

Frantic, he turned all the way around. He tried to move swiftly, but realized he was turning in a terrible, delayed kind of slowed motion. As he turned, his legs gave way under him and he sank in that prolonged slowness to the floor, twisting, corkscrew like, as if he were boring his way into the sawdust.

Laughter raged around him. He saw faces, elongated, exaggerated, magnified. They came close, twisted and savage and ugly with laughter and then spun away.

From some interminable distance he heard Walter-Tom McGee's voice. 'Stand back. You people stand back. Get out of the way. Let him alone.'

Maston sagged against the overturned table. He tried wanly to smile up at the tavern owner.

'Come on, Doc,' McGee said. 'Me and Shirly will take you home.'

'Need a drink,' Maston protested. 'I'm damn near sober.'

Raging laughter spewed around him.

'Well, too damn near sober,' he insisted in a gentle, reasonable tone.

'We'll take you a bottle along home with you, Doc,' McGee promised.

Maston nodded, smiling. 'And a poke of soda crackers

and rat cheese, Walter-Tom. Reckon you could do that? If I'm gone be in my room long as I feel like I'm goin' be there, I'll need some food. Solid food. Rat cheese.'

'Sure, Doc. Anything you want,' McGee said. He and Shirly Folkes knelt beside him, lifting him between them.

Lizabeth met them at the front door. Behind her Carlotta and Tina stood, holding lanterns. Jim Watkins hurried along the rear corridor, hitching his suspenders up over his stout, rounded shoulders.

In the lamplight, Lizabeth stood immobile. She stared, stricken, at something totally new to her, something she had never seen before in all her life, something alien and unknown to her. This was the first time they brought Maston home staggering, reeling, stumbling drunk . . .

Maston shrugged free of the supporting arms and toppled against the doorjamb. He nodded, very formal. 'Want to thank you,' he said, 'want to thank you for your kindness.'

'It's all right, Doc.' McGee smiled.

Watching Lizabeth, McGee winced. She looked as if she were totally repulsed, as if she wanted to withdraw, to run from the reality before her. But she went on standing there, her face like a grey mask.

McGee said, 'We'll just help ole Doc up to his bed, Mrs Devereau, if'n you jus' kinely lead the way.'

Lizabeth swallowed back the bile gorging up in her throat. She shook her head from side to side. She knew her attempt to smile was stiff and awkward and ghastly and unreal. All she could think was she wanted to be rid of these two men from the town saloon, the tavern owner and his leering bartender. 'Oh, no,' she heard herself saying. 'I'm sure I can handle him. I know how busy you must be tonight - downtown.'

'Things are kinely hectic down there.' McGee smiled and shook his head. 'But ain't never too busy to do what we can for you and the Doc.'

'No, ma'm. Glad to help you out. Anytime.' Shirly Folkes nodded and smiled, unblinkingly, at her.

'I appreciate your kindness. Everything. We all do,' Lizabeth said in a taut voice she barely recognized. 'I'm sure the doctor is most grateful.'

'Grateful. Humbly grateful,' Maston mumbled, teetering against the door jamb.

'Nothin' serious, Mrs Doc Devereau,' McGee said. 'Jus' a strange, strange time. That's all. War being over an' all. Ever'body thankful. We ain't celebratin' exactly. We've all lost everything and don't none of us know what's ahead.'

'Yes. Well, I think it's wonderful that the war is over.' Lizabeth held herself in leash and spoke in as firm a tone of dismissal as she could muster.

Reluctantly, McGee and Folkes bowed backwards across the illuminated front porch and down the wide steps. Maston waved. He almost fell, but Jim Watkins leaped forward to support him.

As quickly as possible, Lizabeth helped Maston into the foyer and closed the front door. She nodded her head impatiently toward the servants, dismissing them. 'You can go to bed, Carlotta, Tina. All of you.'

When they didn't move swiftly enough to satisfy her, she rasped out, 'Well, don't just stand there. Haven't you ever seen a - a - sick man before?'

Maston grinned loosely. 'A sick man that is drunk.'

'Don't you want I should help you, Miz Lizabeth?' Jim said.

'No. No. I don't . . . I'll get him up to bed. And I warn you, Carlotta, I won't have you spreading this all over town first thing in the morning. It's all right. He'll be all right.'

Lizabeth placed one of Maston's hands on the gleaming bannister rail, the other she held around her shoulder, supporting his weight against her. 'Can you do it?' she said.

'Do it. With one leg tied behind me.'

They went up the stairs slowly, one riser at a time. It took some moments on each step for Maston to regain his precarious balance and to catch his breath.

'This is most kind of you,' he said. When he bowed, he almost bowled both of them over.

At the landing, gasping for breath, Maston straightened. 'I am a very low person,' he said. 'Even you deserve better.'

'Of course I do. Everybody does.'

His voice was suddenly perversely mocking. 'No matter what you've done.'

Lizabeth sighed. 'I understand, Maston. Truly. I know why you've done this. ...'

With a sudden bitter cursing, he broke free of her arm and swayed precariously. 'How can you understand? How can you? What you know about it? You know nothing 'bout it.'

'I know what I've done to you.'

'Ah. ... But do you know what I've done to you?' He laughed abruptly in that bitter way. 'We're a great pair, Mrs Doctor Devereau. ... God knows we deserve each other.'

Declaiming, Maston swung his arm and the back of his hand struck against the side of Lizabeth's head. She fell away from him. Strangely. Incredibly. One moment she stood there and then she was falling in that terrible slowed motion out away from him.

Gasping, horror washing through him, Maston lunged toward her, trying to catch her. His awkward arms struck her chest and drove her out backwards.

At the edge of the landing, she lost her balance. Screaming, she clutched out wildly. Her hands closed on empty air. He grabbed for her again, then he staggered and sank face down upon the upper flight of steps.

He lay, face pallid and taut, watching Lizabeth soar and wheel away from him, bouncing and bobbling down those steps. It was as if she were a doll thrown in petulant tantrum. He tried to get up, but could not. He told himself it wasn't real. She couldn't be hurt bad, everything moved too slowly in a soft and padded world. She'd be all right. They'd laugh about it in the morning. Well, maybe not *tomorrow* morning. Yawning helplessly, he sprawled on the runner, his head twisted oddly on his shoulder. He slept, breathing raggedly ...

Jim Watkins returned in fifteen minutes with Dr. Claude Lintner. The little medic, only slightly above five feet tall, and slender, looked wan and ineffectual, slightly pompous with carefully cropped Van Dyke beard. But when he entered that front door, he became an effective and self-assured doctor, totally in charge.

Carlotta and Tina stood aside as Jim had left them. Carlotta had tried to lift her mistress, but when she found Miz Lizabeth unconscious and bleeding profusely, she'd backed away, helpless, entreating Jim Watkins to bring a doctor immediately.

Dr Lintner glanced briefly up at Maston sprawled on the steps but he did not go near him. The aging medic made a hasty examination, then straightened Lizabeth's blood-sodden skirts. 'We've got to get her to the hospital,' he said over his shoulder to Jim who stood behind him, unmoving.

'I carry her out to the carriage, suh,' Jim said.

'Yes. You do that.' Dr Lintner straightened. He wiped his bloody hands on a white linen handkerchief. 'Carry her carefully, boy. Very carefully.'

Jim took Lizabeth up in his arms as if she were a little girl. She remained unconscious. He turned and, carrying her, sidled through the front door. Dr Lintner followed.

Carlotta said, 'Doctor.'

Lintner hesitated and glanced impatiently over his shoulder. 'Yes, girl?'

'What about the doctor? What we do with him?'

Lintner shrugged. He did not even glance toward the stairs. His brittle voice rasped in the silence. 'Let him sleep it off. He's done enough for one night. Quite enough.'

Jim drove the doctor's carriage silently at seven o'clock the next morning. Maston sat, grey-faced, on the boot beside him. They went through the early, sun-speckled streets to the hospital.

When Maston told the nurse at the emergency room desk that he wanted to see Mrs Devereau, the nurse shuffled papers nervously. 'You may see your wife, Doctor. Of

course. But Dr Lintner left word – he wanted to see you first – before you saw Mrs Devereau.’

‘Is Dr Lintner here now?’

‘He spent the night here, Doctor.’

Maston winced but said nothing. He found Dr Lintner having coffee in a small inner office. He glanced up when Maston entered but he did not smile or speak. He didn’t invite the younger medic to sit down, either. Lintner’s face remained rigid, grey and unyielding.

‘How is my wife?’ Maston asked at last.

Now Lintner glanced up, brow cocked. ‘Haven’t you seen her?’

‘They said you wanted to see me first.’

‘Yes. Well, perhaps I did leave such a message. In the heat of the moment. However, upon consideration, I didn’t believe you’d want to face me.’

‘I wasn’t particularly thrilled by the prospect, Doctor, but I deferred to your request.’

‘Well, I find I haven’t much to say to you, after all.’

‘How is she?’

‘ – Surely, there isn’t much I can say to you that you haven’t, in human decency, said to yourself – ’

‘How is she?’

‘How? How would she be after being thrown down a flight of stairs?’ Lintner shook his head. ‘I find it hard to accept your standing there cool and quietly inquiring about her condition – after this monstrous thing you’ve done.’

‘May I see her now?’

‘I look at you. I am appalled. Have you no shame? No sense of shame? Do you have any inkling of the inhuman thing you’ve done?’

‘You can stop, Doctor. You can’t hate me any worse than I hate myself.’

‘Hate yourself, do you?’ The doctor’s voice dripped sarcasm. ‘Woke up with a hangover and a terrible sense of guilt, have you? Well, don’t fret yourself, they’ll both wear off by noon.’

Maston drew a deep breath. ‘Doctor, I knew you were

old. Rigid. Without human compassion. But you're an old son of a bitch without compassion, aren't you?

Lintner seemed barely to hear him, and remained untouched and unmoved by the quiet savagery in Maston's voice. 'Compassion? How can you talk of compassion? Had you an ounce of compassion in your priggish soul that young girl wouldn't be lying in there shattered. Do you think I don't know the truth about you and Lizabeth? Just because the truth never passed my lips, do you think I don't know? I know that the poor girl made a terrible mistake. I know she was pregnant when you married her. Perhaps she didn't even tell you. Let you learn for yourself.' He grinned coldly. 'Kind of *caveat emptor*. But understandable. Human, and weak and frail, but understandable. It is your brutality that is beyond my comprehension. I know the motive for your brutality. Did you want to kill her – or was it the foetus you were gunning for? Eh? Did you know that girl would miscarry – if she were hurt badly enough?'

'May I see her now?'

Dr Lintner waved his pink, thin hand. 'Certainly. See her. Go to hell. Though I can't see that it will help her to see you just now, Devereau. I don't even see how it can help you.'

Maston walked out of the small office and closed the door behind him. A nurse led him along the silent, shadowed corridor to a small, private room. When he opened the door, he was shocked to find the room crowded and thick with fresh-cut flowers. 'My God,' he said. 'How did so many people find out so quickly?'

'They're all from one person, Doctor Devereau. They started arriving about five a.m. this morning. They're all from Mr Hampton Gates. Isn't that just the most thoughtful thing?'

Maston walked through the funeral-sweet, cloying fragrance of those huge floral bouquets, all in tall woven cane baskets. Fresh-cut violets in uncounted bunches, with pale lavender faces larger than quarters. Roses in every colour and variety. Chrysanthemums. Even magnolias,

freshly plucked from tall old trees and wrapped in moss, delicate, white, ready to die at the gentlest touch.

He stood beside the white bed. Lizabeth lay on her back, immobile. Her hair spilled, damp and gleaming, across the pillow. She did not blink and remained motionless. He might have thought her comatose, except her eyes were open, fixed on some lenitive vista in the middle distance, and her breathing was regular. 'She's under sedation,' the nurse said. 'Heavy sedation. . . . She suffered severe shock as well as haemorrhages, you know.'

Maston nodded without looking up and the nurse fell silent. He spoke Lizabeth's name but she gave no sign that she was aware of his presence.

He drew a deep breath, spoke in a whisper. 'Lizabeth. There is no way to tell you how sorry I am . . . I never wanted to hurt you . . . I know how evil it's been . . . Lizabeth, I want to start over, I want to make this up to you, if you'll let me.'

Lizabeth's head turned slightly on her pillow now. Her cold gaze impaled him. She did not say anything, she just stared up at him, her eyes dead and empty and flat and grey . . .

XIV

They were strangers. When Maston came to the hospital one morning a week after her fall, he knocked at her door when he found it locked.

The door was opened only slightly. A nurse said, 'Mrs Devereau says to tell you she is dressing. She'll be only a moment or two.'

The door closed. He stood, ten silent minutes, waiting. At last, the door was opened and Lizabeth came out, followed by her nurse. Lizabeth gave him the barest curt glance. She looked well-recovered, except that she was easter-lily pale and her mouth was drawn.

'Sorry I kept you waiting.' Her voice sounded

constrained and certainly not apologetic.

He said nothing, but tried to smile though it didn't matter because she kept her face averted. He took her elbow gently and led her along the quiet corridor splashed with sunlight through tall, narrow windows. She allowed him to lift her in his arms and place her upon the seat in the boot of his buggy, but she remained stiff and withdrawn.

He went around the carriage, swung up onto the boot and drove down the hill toward Park Street. He spoke casually of household matters, of the people who had come to inquire about her health. She shrugged her shoulders but said nothing. When he glanced at her and saw she was not going to respond to anything he said, he sighed heavily and drove the rest of the way to their home in silence.

Inside the foyer of the old house, he stood aside, diffident and ill-at-ease while the servants greeted Lizabeth and welcomed her home. At last he said, 'If you're tired, Lizabeth. Perhaps I'd better carry you upstairs.'

She jerked her head around sharply and stared at him, her face set and chilled. 'I'm not tired, Doctor Devereau. I'm quite all right. Thank you. I can manage the stairs quite well - when I wish to go up them.' She looked away at once, as if consciously dismissing him from her mind and from her presence.

Quietly, he retreated. He opened the front door and went out of it without looking back. Lizabeth said nothing, but her head came around and, her face bleak, her eyes empty, she watched him walk out and close the door behind him.

Maston returned home after midnight. Somehow he got up to his room. He stood for some moments, hand on doorknob, and stared along the darkling corridor at Lizabeth's closed door.

He went into his room, washed up with the well-water Jim had left for him, then stood at the dark window and rubbed his body with a thick towel. He stood unmoving for a long time, staring out north across the darkness to distant

trails and paths and roads which led back to the pleasant land where he'd been born, where he'd grown up, and where already, it was too late to yearn backward toward.

Alone on his bed, he lay awake, obsessed and horrified by his mind's relentless replaying of the scenes on that stair. Lizabeth's falling, his grabbing awkwardly and driving her outward. He kept seeing the brief, burning light raging in Lizabeth's eyes as she fell, and he kept hearing her screams. Her cries woke him when he dozed off and he got up and prowled the lonely room.

He kept going over it in his mind, trying to find some way he could have saved her from falling, saved them from this great and final rift. Even drunk and helpless as he was, he should have done something. Every mental replay showed him all the things he could have done, the ways he could have spared her and saved them before it was too late. But he had wavered helplessly. He saw his actions through the jaundiced eyes of Dr Lintner. It was a vile and depraved thing he had done, unforgivable. He hated himself and he wanted to atone for the wrong he'd done Lizabeth, but he did not know how. Whatever hurt had been between them before was now a hundred times compounded. She had betrayed him. But he had nearly killed her. There wasn't very much left now.

Standing at the window, he heard the knob turn at the corridor door behind him. He heeled around. Lizabeth stood, in a pale lavender robe, a candle in her hand.

'I heard you prowling around in here,' she said.

'I'm sorry I disturbed you.'

'I couldn't sleep anyhow.'

'I'm sorry about that, too.'

'Are you thinking about your home?'

He shrugged.

'Are you wishing you could go back home?'

'No. I know better than that. I've got enough to concern me without taking on woes I can't change.'

'But you miss your home?'

He sighed. 'Yes. Of course.'

‘Would you like to go back – ?’

‘No.’

‘ – for a visit?’

‘No. I could no more go back for a visit than I could return hoping to stay.’

‘Why not?’

‘If I could go back – and went back – I’d never come back here ... But we both know I can’t go back up there anyway.’

‘There would certainly be no reprisals from the Federal government.’

He shrugged. ‘No. You’re right. They wouldn’t care that I deserted the Confederate Army. And there is no Confederacy any more. No, I have nothing to fear from my former enemies. Now I have only the hatred of my family, friends, neighbours and erstwhile comrades in arms ... No. I could never go back now – even if I wanted to.’

‘What are you going to do?’

He stared at her. ‘Don’t worry about it, Lizabeth. I’ll work it out. Don’t worry about it.’

She exhaled heavily and said nothing more. She abruptly blew out the candle, went through the door and closed it behind her. The rest of his night was tormented by strange and violent dreams.

He was up at dawn and in his office before seven the next morning. He saw no way to repair the rift between them. It only widened. It seemed to him they could do nothing but close their eyes to it. He could not back home again, and there was nothing left for him here except his work.

He immersed himself in research. In the small room behind his office which once served Jim Watkins as bed chamber, Maston set up a laboratory for experiments and studies he was barred from conducting at the hospital. His small lab was complete with the latest equipment obtained from Federal army of occupation medics at black market prices.

He found he could get almost anything from the lavishly

supplied army of occupation – for a price. He ordered medical journals, including the venerable *Medical Repository* which had been impossible to get during the war. He bought stacks of back numbers and devoured them all. He filled a large case with the latest medical books, procured at tenfold the publishers' prices from the U.S. Army. No matter their cost, they were a bargain, each one reporting the latest advances to come out of the civil war.

He gorged himself on medical history and the study of the nineteenth century modernization of medicine. These advances were incredible, because of, and often despite, the leading physicians practicing and controlling medical societies, publications and hospitals. He drew new inspiration from the work of men like Hemholtz who formulated the principles of thermodynamics and invented the ophthalmoscope which opened a whole new world to medicine. Most thrilling was the way Laennec created the first stethoscope, a rolled quire of paper placed against the generous bosom of a buxom, overly prim young patient. With this wondrous new instrument, doctors could probe ailing chests and deceased hearts could beg for aid.

Men, dead or in their dotage became more real to him than the physicians and surgeons around him. Emil du Bois-Reymond, creator of modern electrophysiology; Henle, the expounder of the epithelial system; Robert Remak whose discovery of nerve cells in the heart of a frog revealed the cause of the heartbeat. They crowded around him, sharing their lore in these books.

He read, in awe, of that first medic to tap rale-shaken chests in a manner reintroduced by Corvisart in the early 1800s which brought back Auenbrugger's totally forgotten doctrine of percussion. He was fascinated by those scientists who investigated nature and reported findings for the first time without any reference to gods and devils. They found no moral purpose in nature and no ghosts. But they stirred screams of protest from every pulpit and many a medical sanctum.

Prejudice! God, the prejudice they'd fought simply to

stop the bloodletting which reached such criminal proportions that in one year forty-two million leeches were imported into France where scarcely a French belly had not given nourishment to these bloodsuckers. He sweated with those British doctors who dealt with body-snatchers in order to study or teach dissection. He understood how driven the doctors Hunter and Vesaliers must have been to steal cadavers for their labs when the law punished procurement of dead bodies for dissection and yet education law required a practical knowledge of the art.

And the outcry against chloroform and ether used in surgery after the first demonstration of chloroform on 4 November 1847 at the Massachusetts General Hospital, sixteen years after country doctor Sam Guthrie, without a medical diploma, distilled the first 'sweet whiskey' at Sackett's Harbour. Anesthesia which became regarded as American medicine's greatest gift to the world was disparaged and denigrated and despised. Nitrous oxide or 'laughing gas' was used for amusement, parties or torture of Negroes who were forced to inhale the fumes and then perform for hysterical crowds.

One of the greatest of French medics, in an attempt to outlaw anaesthesia, said, 'To avoid pain in surgical operations . . . should not be permitted. Knife and pain, in operative surgery, are two words . . . and it is necessary to admit the connection.' And he had said that as recently as 1839.

And the prejudice against progress and intolerance of change or truth was matched only by hypocrisy, both inside the medical profession and among its patients. The first outbreak of syphilis in Boston, twenty-five years after the arrival of the Mayflower, infected sixteen persons. It went untreated, unrecognized and denied by people led by the founder of puritanism in America, John Winthrop. When finally, as governor of Massachusetts, Winthrop was forced to act against the plague, he brought in a young surgeon from the West Indies, who through some miracle and God's help, cured them all in a few weeks. To have

cured syphilis in the seventeenth century in a short time was certainly through the providence of the Almighty.

Medicine had its villains who hid behind dogma, infallibility and pomposity. Benjamin Rush was noted as the father of American medicine. The name had been revered at Tulane, Maston recalled. And yet, when the yellow fever plague almost wiped out the city of Philadelphia – then the largest U.S. metropolis – Rush bled and purged the victims without let up, in what Corbett called a ‘reign of blood’. Rush bled the Bronze John victims and prescribed calomel and jalap which the populace ingested until the people died and the supplies dwindled to nothing. Rush wrote as the cause of the epidemic, ‘a meteor seen at two o’clock in the morning on the twelfth of September. It fell between Third Street and the hospital, nearly in a line with Pine Street. Moschetoës, always bad in autumn, were uncommonly numerous and dead cats added to the impurity of the air.’ He finally deduced that the sole cause of the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia was the damaged coffee on a wharf. But Rush’s greatest cruelty was the ‘tranquillizing chair’ for the mentally ill. The patient was strapped at the ankles and wrists, and across the abdomen and chest, while his head was confined in a wooden box. This was the great physician’s alternative to the evils of the insane asylums.

In Charles Darwin, Maston found a kinship of temperament. Darwin had rushed out of an operating theatre, when as a medical student, he was forced to witness a brutal and bloody operation, performed without anaesthesia, on a child. Darwin, in shock and revulsion, abandoned the practice of medicine. Maston felt somehow less guilty at his own horror and despair when chloroform and ether were no longer available to Confederate forces at Petersburg. In his nightmares he saw those men tied to tables, and held down by force. As they were hacked, they tore madly at their straps and shrieked in uncontrollable terror. Unable to endure that bloody agony of men probed and cut and sawed without the release of either ether or

chloroform, he had deserted his post. Knowing about Darwin made him feel less lonely, less a coward, and more human.

He pored over those books which brought the latest methods for removing the vesico-vaginal fistula which had crippled and destroyed women without killing them, for so long. The use of spinal analgesia, the localization of surgical shock. American doctors sutured blood vessels, grew tumours, transplanted organs, rejuvenated tissues, cultivated nerve cells outside any organism, and brought into life the first fatherless frog. American medics differentiated between typhoid and typhus fevers. Following in the wake of Oliver Wendell Holmes who preached 'preventive medicine', they searched for ways to eradicate hookworm, to treat goiter preventatively, pellagra, beri-beri, rickets and pernicious anaemia. He felt a kinship with every medic who'd struggled against repression, ignorance, prejudice and intolerance.

But best of all, by throwing himself into work, research and reading, he was able to live with his agony; he adjusted to it. He accepted it, and when it troubled him, he worked harder.

He found his office crowded with new patients, his nights sleepless. He prowled the backroads on house calls, sleeping between farms, with Jim Watkins at the reins, the horse plodding, heavy-gaited. He was liked by Union Army-of-Occupation doctors and often consulted by them. He was invited to the inauguration of William Morris, the military governor of Florida.

When he told Lizabeth they'd been invited to attend the gala military inauguration, she stared at him, her face pallid, eyes stricken. 'I won't go.'

Shocked, he laughed. 'Of course you will. These people are here. They run things. We've got to get along with them.'

'You may, I don't. I'll never speak to one of them. I'll certainly never shake hands or curtsy or intentionally touch one of those yankee bastards.'

'My God, Lizabeth. They're ordinary people. They had no more to do with starting this war than you did.'

'They killed or maimed my friends. Destroyed the homes of people I love. Now I'm supposed to forgive and forget?'

'Just forget will be enough.'

'Well, I won't. I can't. It's different with you. You've already . . .' Her voice trailed off, defiant and she sank her tooth into her underlip.

'Already betrayed my people?' he inquired.

She shrugged her shoulders and stared at him, unblinkingly.

As Maston's practice grew, he found Dr Lintner progressively more adamant against him. Patients reported that the elderly medic called Maston 'that brutal quack'.

From the first days of their marriage, Maston went home for lunch. He tried to be punctual because Carlotta always set a place for him at the kitchen table promptly at twelve. For a while Lizabeth came in and had coffee with him as he ate; recently she had not joined him. He forgave her because he knew what a sacrifice it was for her to get up so early.

One day, a few months after Lizabeth returned from the hospital, he arrived to find the house loud with laughter and music.

When he walked along the corridor to the parlour, he saw at once that the party had been going on for some hours. People glanced up from the piano where most were grouped and a silence settled over Lizabeth's guests. All of them, he saw, were friends from those years before she married him.

He stood a moment in the doorway, smiling politely into that diffident silence, and then he withdrew. He returned to his office without eating the meal Carlotta placed before him. After that day, he no longer went home at noon.

His patients revered him, though the more observant and sensitive among them found him abruptly, yet profoundly, changed. They said that sometimes in the middle of an examination, diagnosis, or a relating of ills, they would find

him staring straight ahead, forgetful of his patient and with a deep and mortal sadness in his eyes that was most upsetting . . .

XV

She got out of the buggy and walked up the wide steps to the shaded veranda of the old Keyes mansion. She felt as if she plodded through an almost tangible force of tension; she wondered if it was some sense of wrong she'd brought with her, or was it an aura about this place?

The great carved oak front door stood wide open and laughter washed out over her as she crossed the porch. Through the doorway she saw bright print dresses, make-do, but carefully preserved. She hesitated a moment at the entry as if admiring a profusion of gardenias brightening Mrs Keyes' hedges. Jennifer, who was standing just inside the foyer, spied her at once and bestowed upon her her brightest smile of welcome. Lizabeth entered the loud old house reluctantly.

'Darling!' Jennifer cried, extending her shapely hands, palms down and slender fingers splayed. 'Do come in. I've just been standin' heah watchin' for you.'

'I had no idea you cared.' Lizabeth did not bother to smile. Jennifer had invited her here; she'd accepted; nowhere was there a clause about forgiving or forgetting. This was the first time the two inseparable friends had spoken since Lizabeth's wedding.

'Cared? Of course I care. Aren't you just my very dearest, oldest friend in this world, Lizabeth Devereau? I know we had a little ole spat, but you're too sweet ever to hold a grudge.'

'That proves how little you know me,' she said. 'I hate forever. I never forget a slight. And I always get even . . . darling. . . .'

Jennifer laughed in such a bright and joyous way that everybody in her parlour turned to stare at them.

Lizabeth felt her face flush slightly, but she went on holding her head high and smiling though her cheek muscles ached. Jennifer Keyes might hurt her, but she could never make her show her pain in public.

Her gaze raked across the familiar faces in the Keyes parlour. They were all a blur to her, slightly out of focus, with that same sense of unreality about them as permeated the whole afternoon. It was unreal that Jennifer Keyes had abruptly invited her here, more unlikely that she'd accepted, more improbable that she was here like this, smiling in this hated place.

Her indolent eyes touched upon one face, moved on, leapt back and held. Hampton Gates stood far across the living room near an oriel window, watching her with a faintly hungry smile twisting his petulant mouth and totally oblivious to everybody else in the place, even the young girl chattering up at him.

Without a word of apology to the prating blonde at his side, Hampton Gates walked across the room toward Lizabeth, his gaze rivetted upon her.

Lizabeth felt her heart sink and then batter insanely against her ribs. She gave Jennifer a taunting smile and spoke from the side of her mouth. 'Is this why you invited me here?'

'Why, whatever are you saying?'

'And doesn't this make you feel the tiniest bit like a procuress?'

Jennifer matched her tone. 'Why, not one bit, darling. Who knows you and your needs better than I do? If anything, I feel noble. Unselfish. I'm only trying to be helpful. Doing an old friend a favour.' She shrugged. 'And, besides, Lizabeth, you know better than I do that when a Gates asks a favour, it's really a command . . . I'm sure *you* know that, better than anyone . . .'

In less than five minutes she was walking alone with young Gates across the flagstone terrace and into the quiet, remote garden. When her gaze first located Hampton in

that parlour, he'd looked bored, even sullen, but now he smiled at her in a premeditatedly charming way that had been unsettling female hearts since he was six years old.

As soon as they were out of sight of the house, he stopped and caught her arm firmly in his fist. Almost half-lifting her, he turned her body and pulled her against him, and tilted her face up to his.

She averted her lips. 'Now what's wrong?' he said. His face darkened with that sullen petulance again and his brow tilted, mockingly.

She shook her head, stunned. 'I guess I've just never known anyone like you - '

'Few people have. We Gates men are an elite, rare breed.'

'Or are you just unmitigated bastards?'

Now he laughed and a gleam of malicious gentility glittered in his hard blue eyes. 'It's the same thing, my darling.'

She struggled, but he would not release her. She could feel the hardening outline probing at her thighs. 'Such arrogance and gall. I suppose you do have to be born with it.'

His eyes smiled down at her in perverse civility. 'I don't know what you're so disagreeable about.'

'You toss me over publicly. You humiliate and injure my father on a public street. You treat me like a slut. And you wonder why I'm disagreeable.'

He continued to smile imperturbably. 'I sent you flowers.'

'Let me go.'

'You know I'm not going to, Lizabeth. You know you don't want me to.'

'How little you know me.'

'Exactly. That's the reason for this meeting, for this whole stupid party, as a matter of fact. We don't know each other well enough.'

'I know all I want to know about you. Much more. All you need to know is that I am married - '

'Precisely. And that's all to the good as far as we're concerned. You know a married woman can come and go much more freely than an unmarried girl.'

'Let me go.'

'I'd have to be a damned fool to do that. And I'm not a damned fool.'

'What if I screamed?'

'And made a public display of our passion? I don't think you want to scream, but if you do, go ahead.'

Lizabeth writhed in his arms. 'You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?'

'Yes. For the first time since the night you so avidly thrust your nakedness upon me in that forest glen - '

'I was a fool.'

'We both were. I should never have let you go. I have been unable to get you - and your nakedness - and your sensual abandon - out of my mind. Oh, I confess I've tried. Many a female has suffered as I sought release from your grip on my fevered imagination. I've had other women since our night in that dark glen, but not one who was as exciting, as wild and cooperative, as anxious for it, as you were. No, Lizabeth, what we had was special, you brought a nymph-like fever I have not found since. I know how you love it. I know there are no limits to the pleasures you'll provide your master. As inappropriate as it may have seemed at the time, I should have married you.'

'Well, you didn't marry me. Whatever was between us - that night - is over and dead and gone. I am married and - '

'Your husband throws you down a flight of stairs - '

'- And even if I weren't married, I'd never come near you. I reject any proposition boiling in your sordid mind.'

'Stop lying, Lizabeth. It's one thing to lie to me. That's permissible. Women do it all the time. But you're lying to yourself. You think I don't know that you and that doctor you married have no marriage at all? That he hit you - '

'He was drunk. I don't have to defend Maston or myself to you - '

'Yes. But that's the crux of the whole matter, my pet. He

was drunk. He *was* drunk. Why was he drunk? Because he found out about you and me – and our rendezvous – before we were married? That's it, isn't it? He's jealous, frustrated, impotent, because he knows your body belongs to me – to use as I like.'

Now Lizabeth broke free. 'I'm leaving.'

'Of course, we both are.'

'I'm not leaving here with you.'

'Won't it wash dirty linen in public to flounce out of here after walking out into the Keyes garden with me? Wouldn't it be far more civilized to allow me to drive you home in my coach? If after that, you don't want to see me again . . .'
Hampton smiled, shrugged his wide shoulders and let his taunting voice trail off.

Lizabeth had heeled around. Now, she turned and gazed at him across her shoulder. 'Stop this, Hampton. You must let me go.'

'Let you go? We've just begun. Everything's in our favour now. Everything. You're married, you're free to entertain whom and when you like. Your husband stays drunk or abusive. No one would blame you for turning somewhere else for – consolation.'

The more Hampton talked, the more elated he became. His blue eyes twinkled with an urbane savagery and he was once more his overweening and totally self-confident person. 'Don't you know I'm insanely in love with you?' he said.

Now Lizabeth laughed, coldly, helplessly. 'You never loved anyone in your life but yourself,' she told him. 'And you never will.'

'That's where you're wrong,' he said. 'I do love you. Passionately. Wildly. Savagely. I never suggested I loved you as much as I love myself, but, my God, Lizabeth, we can't have everything, can we?'

Jennifer stood at the rim of shade on her veranda to say goodbye. Hampton Gates touched Lizabeth's elbow to help her up into his polished coach. She did not glance back

toward Jennifer, nor say anything to her. Jennifer called out to them in her brightest tone, but Gates merely nodded curtly. He jerked his head toward the driver and the coach was moving by the time Hampton settled upon the plush, velour-covered seats.

Lizabeth found an almost obscene opulence about the tailored interior of Hampton's coach. The trimmings gleamed like sterling silver. She shook her head and said, 'It's all so ostentatious that it almost borders on good taste.'

Hampton laughed in delight with her and closed a blue curtain at the window, making the tonneau of the four-horse vehicle a dim, warm cavern. 'My God, Lizabeth. How I've missed you.'

'Flattery won't buy you much with me – after all you've done to me and my family,' she reminded him.

'I've apologized. Can't you forgive me?'

'No. Because I hate your guts.'

He smiled faintly. 'Oh, we'll see the other side of *that* coin, you and I.'

'My God, such arrogance. Won't you believe I despise you and want nothing to do with you?'

His lips pulled into a wide, self confident smile. 'Why should I pretend to believe anything as negative as that? It's posturing. Lies. Part of the mating ritual.'

She laughed in spite of herself, helplessly. She wondered if there were any way to make Hampton understand she did not find him irresistible, or even very attractive? For him, this was all a game. 'Oh? I'm just playing coy? Hard to get?'

He shrugged his shoulders, smiling. 'We have plenty of time.'

With his cane, Hampton pushed open a small skylight window in the forward roof of the coach. The black face smiled down at them through it. 'Yassuh, Masta Hampton?'

'Drive out the old McNear Road, Esau,' Hampton said and reclosed the door plate.

'I want to go home.' Lizabeth sat, erect and stiff.

'And you shall. Only not right now. I've missed you,

Lizabeth. Can't I make you understand that? I've suffered. I've earned the right to – talk to you at least – for a little while.'

She winced, hating herself for the way her heart battered erratically. Damn it, you could not dangle wine in front of a person sick with thirst and expect no reaction at all, could you? As he spoke, he shifted closer and put his arm lightly about her shoulder.

She tried to move away, but his strong fingers closed on her shoulder. He looked down at her, smiled and shook his head. She suddenly felt trapped and truly helpless against him because the touch of his hand turned her hot and liquid inside.

Hampton left his hand on her shoulder, the fingers tense upon her flesh. She thought with irritation of the livid bruises he'd mark into her skin. But at least, this posed no threat, Maston seldom looked at her now, and certainly not in the nude. He didn't come near her.

Quietly, Hampton leaned over and kissed her lips. She neither struggled nor returned his ardour. She lay unmoving. With this, he was content. He bent over so his mouth grazed along her throat and nuzzled at the tops of her breasts. She shivered involuntarily, her whole body shuddering.

'There,' he whispered. His breath was hot in her ear. 'Isn't that better?'

She didn't answer. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, he moved his hand inside the bodice of her dress and lifted out her breasts. Now she struggled, but his other hand had slipped down into the fiery crevice between her legs. Now, when she knew she must quickly cross her legs, repulse him forever, she lay immobile and one of his fingers moved against the fevered mound, expertly sliding in upon her clitoris.

She did not move for a long time as he probed through her dress and petticoats at her thighs. She felt his mouth close on her nipples and the excitement flared out from them like some static shock.

She sagged against him. Her body became lax. She did not want to encourage him, and yet she was helpless to discourage him. She could only yield to his knowing touch. Somehow, crinolines and skirt were gathered about her hips and his hand caressed, hot and wet from her body. Now he was on familiar territory and no longer feared being repelled, if he ever had. She lay back, her eyes closed and her mouth parted, and it was settled: he was going to have her.

He moved his hands quickly and knowingly, loosening buttons, removing her garments. While he kissed her, his fingers pushed up into her and working, he tapped the roof-plate with his cane. The coach left the lane and rolled into some enclosed copse in the hills above town.

By the time the coach stopped rolling, she found herself lying naked in his arms. She struggled and cried out, 'Oh my God . . . my God . . . am I truly this easy?'

'You truly are.' He spoke against her throat, laughing with delight and sweet agony.

As he started to remove his trousers, Lizabeth looked around wildly, seeing her clothing strewn about the tonneau. She cried out, 'What about the driver?'

Hampton pulled her hand down upon him and she gripped him fiercely, helpless and fascinated. Hampton laughed. 'Esau? What about him? He'll just have to get his own filly. Or do without. Or jerk off up there. He does that sometimes when things get heated down here. He's been with me a long time. He knows what to expect.'

She sagged under Hampton, allowing him to press her legs wide apart. Her eyelids drooped so her long dark lashes wavered like sooty dark curtains on her face. The coach began to pitch and rock. Lizabeth wanted to scream out in hysterical protest. This was not what she wanted. It was nothing she wanted, and yet she felt herself being used as Hampton had used her in a hundred fevered fantasies, and she hated herself because she was so totally enslaved, and by a man she hated.

At last, and she had no idea how long he used her, only

that he had everything he wanted, things she hadn't even known about, or suspected, and finally he fell away from her, exhausted.

She moved away from him and took up her clothes, feeling dirtied and cheap and covered with vile, and yet in the same instant stunned by a tingling thrill of helplessness against him. She had no defences against him. If he reached for her now, he could have her, and she was vulnerable. The thought made her almost physically ill.

'I won't see you again, Hampton,' she said, her voice choked. 'I swear I won't.'

Hampton didn't bother to answer her. He gave her a faint, taunting smile. And yawned ...

XVI

Lizabeth stood at the bay window of her parlour. The grandfather clock in the foyer struck twice in the thick afternoon silence of the old house, the sound startling her because her nerves were stretched so tautly.

These last weeks were hectic ones for her. Everything seemed just out of her control, rushing along and sweeping her helplessly with it. Time either raced feverishly or floated in a confused and melancholy void. This was such a hell of a life. She was nothing she wanted to be, neither a faithful wife nor a very cherished mistress. Hampton came to her now when his appetites persuaded him; there seemed nothing she could do, either to keep him away, or to hasten his return. She felt sick with helplessness and desire.

She shifted her body impatiently, wanting to walk away from this spot where she spent so much time lately, yet she did not desert her picket post in the shadowy shield of a curtain, from which lookout she could watch that empty, sunstruck stretch of Park Avenue, along which Hampton came from downtown, when the spirit moved him.

As the shriek of the old clock died, echoing, she shivered

and a sense of rage engulfed her and she bit her lip to keep from crying out against the self hatred that moiled deep inside her. She felt almost physically ill, though she knew how quickly she could recover, how swiftly she could soar above this yellow fog that surrounded, oppressed and almost suffocated her: the instant when she saw Hampton's glittering coach approach along that sun-stunned street out there, her pulses would quicken, her mind would clear, and she would be restored. *God, let him come, before another entire afternoon slips away from us.*

As the long, separate minutes trudged heavily past, she wavered between anger, frustration and a heated fever of excitement and anticipation. How different it all was now between her and Hampton than that first meeting at Jennifer's carefully-orchestrated party. She'd returned home sick with fear and remorse from that first drive into the hills. She vowed to him, aloud, that she would not see him again, but when he returned, smiling and at ease, she found herself avidly awaiting him. After that, everything was easier. It was like the old saw, getting the first olive out of a bottle might be difficult, but after that first one, the rest were easy.

She no longer worried about the right or wrong in her affair. Maston seemed to fade slightly into the seamless background; he no longer mattered. She realized that Maston might be told what was going on, he might even catch Hampton with her. But she no longer considered the morality of it; her only concern was that if Maston caught them together, he would try to keep her away from Hampton. And she did not see how she could live a celibate existence now. Even thinking about it made her cold and defiant.

Thinking about Hampton brought a flush to her face. Her hands sweated. She could feel the hot liquids simmering deep inside her. He would find her ready. She was always ready, but today she planned an erotic surprise for him: she wore no underclothing except a thin slip under her dress. This would please and excite and arouse him, if

only he came.

The hot street remained empty and silent. Ill, she turned away from the window.

When she had despaired, certain he would not come, she heard the hard ringing of her doorbell.

'I gets it, Miz Lizabeth.' Tina appeared from the dining room. Damn her, that girl must have been poised there, waiting.

Seething with ill-suppressed rage, Lizabeth met the maid at the foyer door. She spoke in a savage whisper. 'I'll answer the door, Tina. You get back in that kitchen. And you stay there until I call you.'

Touching at her hair, feeling her cheeks burn, Lizabeth opened the front door. Hampton stood there, grinning at her in that old proprietary way. She was his chattel, to use as he wished; this was clear in his handsome face and unflinching blue eyes.

She shook her head involuntarily, staring past Hampton's wide, slender shoulder at his guest. This was the first time she ever saw Tam Beauchard. Her heart sank. She was frantic with desire for Hampton, but he was not alone.

Hampton stepped in through the front door and the dark-skinned, elegant young Cuban followed him. Hampton kicked the door closed with his heel. He took Lizabeth into his arms and kissed her, massaging her breast overtly. Lizabeth struggled, seeing that the black-eyed man watched with faint, detached amusement.

Hampton kept his arm about Lizabeth, stroking her throat, her cheeks and arms. She tried to step beyond his release, but he would not let her go.

'This is a friend of mine, Lizabeth. I've been anxious for you to meet him. Tam Beauchard is a young Cuban millionaire, and the most accomplished latin roue of my experience. Tam is a scandalous man, even in torrid Havana.'

'Ham exaggerates my good qualities,' Tam said with a devastating smile, 'but I have looked forward to meeting

you, señora, since first Ham sang your praises to me. You are far lovelier even than he suggested.'

'I just didn't have the words,' Ham said. 'Look at her. Isn't she a beauty?'

Ham drew her against him again, closing his hand over her breast once more to lay emphasis on how completely she belonged to him. She saw Tam's admiring eyes follow Ham's fondling caress. Again she tried to break away, but Ham's grip became covertly steel-like. He smiled, speaking urbanely as he caressed her for Beauchard's enjoyment. 'Tam is here in Florida from Havana on a purchasing assignment for his government. Tam's family has bought from us for many years – lumber, cattle, naval stores, cotton.'

His words were correct, but as he talked, Ham loosened the pins holding Lizabeth's rich blonde hair and it toppled about her shoulders. Again, he said to Tam, with that pride of ownership, 'Have you ever seen anything lovelier?'

Tam didn't answer Hampton. He spoke directly to Lizabeth. 'There is no beauty more cherished in my country than the golden blonde, señora. You are ravishing.'

Tam's unyielding gaze told her far more clearly than any words that he knew a great deal about her, that Hampton had told him – in erotic detail – all that had transpired between them.

Lizabeth pulled away, uncomfortable with her hair spilling about her shoulders, her dress mussed, the exposed rises of her breasts livid with Hampton's fingerprints. 'Why don't we sit down?' she said, her voice chilled.

'I'd like to,' Hampton said. 'But I've promised Tam I would make arrangements with the military governor for shipment of his goods from Florida. I shouldn't be too long. I thought you would be generous enough to entertain Tam while I'm away. Believe me, Tam's been working ten and twelve hours a day since he arrived. He deserves a little recreation. All work and no play, you know?'

Shocked, Lizabeth caught her breath. She tried to protest, but again Hampton drew her against him. He

kissed her ardently and let his hand move across the plane of her belly into the crevice at her thighs. He even turned her body slightly so that his guest could not fail to see how he used her.

Lizabeth struggled, outraged, but both Beauchard and Hampton remained urbane and smiling, as if everything were most conventional and matter of course. Hampton excused himself and crossed the room. Tam and Lizabeth stood silently as he closed the front door behind him.

'Hampton's most impulsive,' she said. She caught her hair and tried to pin it up again.

'Please,' he said, 'leave your hair loose as it is. It is most exciting, lovely. I would appreciate it.'

She sighed, and looked about, as if in a snare. 'I'll call the maid and have her serve us some tea,' she said.

His cool grin raked her. He shook his head. 'I don't want tea, señora. Any more than you do.'

'Perhaps a drink of some kind?'

He continued to hold her gaze locked under his. His expression would have been insulting, except that his smile was so bland. He shook his head from side to side again. 'Do you mind if I close the foyer door?'

He did not wait for her answer. He crossed the room, his walk somehow bringing into Lizabeth's heated mind the stride of a puma. He closed the door. She heard him lock it, but she did not move.

He stalked back with that puma stride and came close to her. 'I must touch that hair,' he said. 'I must hold it in my hands – like gold.'

She tried to retreat, but his hands thrust into the thick tresses of her hair and closed with an almost frightening strength upon the sides of her head.

He moved his fingers for a long time, almost hypnotically over her scalp, the nape of her neck, her throat. She began to feel drowsy, helpless. She was afraid she would fall if he released her.

His voice caressed her as gently and as persistently as his hands. 'You feel weak-kneed, don't you?'

She managed a weak, half-smile, but she was too breathless to answer.

'You feel like you want to sink to your knees, don't you?' he asked.

Her eyes opened, flickering slightly. There was no doubt in her mind now. Hampton had not left out anything she did for him. When her gaze brushed against Tam's, her lids closed slightly and her eyes fell under his.

He put the faintest downward pressure on each side of her head with his splayed hands. She sank against him and slipped slowly to the floor. He kept his hands on her head, and pressed her face into the heated rigidity at his fly. She breathed anguishedly, her mouth parted, knowing her breath seared him, roused him.

He moved her face upon him until she finally put her arms about his hips and embraced him, nuzzling at him. Then he said, 'That is right, little one.'

His fingers opened his fly and she pressed herself upon him, frantic and abandoned.

It was almost six o'clock before Tambura allowed her to get up from the couch and slip on her petticoat and dress. 'You are even more wonderful than I knew you would be,' he whispered.

She stood in the heated silence of late afternoon. It was as if this room were a planet apart, steamy and humid, and cut off from the rest of the universe. Not even sounds from her kitchen drifted through the thick silence.

She sighed, exhausted, and bitterly depressed in reaction to her own abandoned behaviour with a stranger. She stared up at him, eyes chilled. 'You treat me like a whore ...'

'Far from it, *querida*.' His voice was easy, almost teasing. 'You are an exquisite woman ... I treated you as a goddess.'

'And will you leave pesos on the mantel?' Her mouth twisted.

'Only if you wish it, *querida*.'

'I wish only never to see you again, Señor Beauchard . . . You must never come back to this house.'

'How *triste*, sad. Why do you decide this?'

'I won't do this – in my own home – like this. I won't.' Her head moved back and forth and she stared at him as he continued calmly to dress. She felt sick and empty with anguish and despondency.

He smiled. 'If we cannot meet here, this poses no *problema, querida*. I shall reserve a suite at the Colonial Hotel downtown. We can meet there. I am sure they have inconspicuous entrys through which you might come and go, seen by no one.'

'You know I can't do that.'

Now, abruptly, Beauchard's manner changed. A chilled cloud darkened his narrowed black eyes. His brow tilted slightly as he watched her with the unblinking stare of a python. After a moment, he shrugged, and when he spoke his voice was hard and unyielding. 'I think you will make some compromise, señora – when you wish to see me again.'

Lizabeth sat at the beechwood secretary in her parlour. Late morning sunlight streamed through the tall windows and spilled yellowly across the carpeting toward her. The pen in her hand shook; she had trouble writing with it, and she trembled so that she had to steady her arm to dip the nib into the inkwell.

She tried to write slowly, tried to conceal the way her hand quivered because of her empty longing and mounting inner excitement.

She managed, after the third attempt, to scribble a legible note:

'I shall ride my horse alone north of town at two this afternoon.'

She did not sign the missive, nor did she put a name at the salutation. She sat for a long time reading and rereading the thirteen words as if they were the confusing fine-print in some long-term lease.

She remained rigid for more long-stretched minutes before she finally scrawled 'Señor T. Beauchard,' across the face of the envelope.

Still she sagged unmoving for some moments. She heard the remote sounds of Tina's and Carlotta's moving about the house at their chores and vague noises from the street, but there was no reality except this note gripped in her icy fingers.

Her forehead was damp with perspiration, and she felt uncomfortably warm and chilled by turn; her mouth felt dry. But she knew there was nothing somatic wrong with her. It was now three weeks since she'd first sank submissively to her knees before Tam Beauchard within an hour of her meeting him. She had met him only two or three times since then, though she had waited breathless; he had only to beckon and she would have gone running. One afternoon he cantered past her house on a fine horse. She hurried out immediately in her buggy and he had overtaken her on a remote country lane.

Another time, she had gone to his hotel room, even though she had sworn she would not. But she existed in a confused atmosphere of discontent. She was restless. Nothing was as she wanted it.

She had seen Hampton Gates only once since he'd brought Tam to her house that afternoon. Hampton came boldly to her front door. She'd tried to turn him away; he'd simply refused to go. In the parlour, he had her undressed and powerless to resist him within minutes. But he was less exciting than ever after Tam Beauchard and they'd ended, arguing tautly.

'You had no right to bring that man here,' she said.

'Tam? Why, I knew you would want him. He's built like a young stud.'

'I'm not a whore. You can't treat me like a whore.'

Hampton shrugged. 'Why split hairs, Lizabeth? You are my whore. Why quibble about it? You'll do what I want, when I want. . . . With Tam, I wanted you to do me a favour - for your own pleasure. And you did it. Why be

disagreeable? You know damned well it was exciting and pleasing. After all, I didn't stay and watch, did I? You know I could have.'

She was silent a taut breathless moment. 'You don't give a damn what happens to my marriage, do you?'

'Do you?'

Sitting at the secretary with the note in her fist, she shook her head. She was helpless against Hampton. She was powerless to resist the beauty and fascinating magnetism of Tam Beauchard. Hampton was right about that. She had never dreamed a man could be built so extraordinarily, or be so expert in pleasing and satisfying a woman. She'd tried to stay away from Tam, but she'd known from that first afternoon that she could not.

She called for Tina, sent her with the note to the registration desk at the Colonial Hotel. Then she'd wandered about the house, empty-bellied with anticipation, until two o'clock. She hurried from the house as the clock struck in the entry and rode sedately sidesaddle north out of town. When she glimpsed Tam idling in his carriage at the side of the forest roadway, she spurred her horse past him, and he followed, racing to the pine copse where she ground-tied her mount and swung up into his carriage and into his strong and avid young arms as they dashed toward their rendezvous with that watcher-in-the-woods.

PART THREE

1866 THE MISTRESS

Lizabeth spent a sleepless night. Savagely, she dug the red clay from the shoe of Maston's saddle horse; she stood over Jim Watkins until the black man polished away the last trace of clay from Maston's boot. In her own room, she worked for an hour with strong soap, washing the last vestige of tell-tale dirt from her skirt. It was as if that red clay were vile and she was covered with vile. She stood over the earthenware bowl, scrubbing at her hands long after the faintest speck of red was gone. It was the painful memory she could not wash away.

She undressed in the darkness and lay down across her bed. She stared through the opened window at the star-studded sky, the faint mistiness of the seamless moonlight. She had believed her affair with Tam Beauchard was a trivial matter of the loins and not of the heart. Whatever happened between them could be enjoyed in sensual pleasure in the white heat of desire and put aside in the cool light of reason. But that fearful moment in that wilderness hammock had changed all that. What seemed gratifying and beautiful, if transient, was suddenly ugly, and evil, and ruinous.

She tried to sleep and could not. She prowled the room. She stood, shivering with damp night chill at her window while the world outside darkened and jelled into rigid silence. She was too taut-drawn to sleep. When, sometime in the dark hours before dawn, she lay down across her rumpled sheets, she dozed, waking out of a frightening nightmare, her heart thundering wildly against her ribcage.

She was wide awake in the first livid shafts of dawn. She wanted to get up, but she did not want to see anyone; she didn't want to have to face the servants, she wanted to delay as long as possible that moment when she had to confront Maston.

She forced herself to go on lying, sweated and uncomfortable, as the morning heat grew intense and unyielding in her bedroom. There seemed not a breeze in

the world. At last, when she could lie in the bed of torture no longer, she got up, bathed, brushed and pinned up her hair, and dressed, taking her time.

The clock in the downstairs foyer tolled ten times as she emerged from her bedroom. The cavernous upstairs hallway seemed empty and silent with that hot quiet of abandoned places. Maston's door was still closed. She walked, as if tiptoeing on eggs, to the stairs and hurried down them.

Tina stepped out of the dining room, startling her. Lizabeth caught her breath and said, 'Has the doctor gone to his office?'

Tina shook her head. 'He ain't come out of his room yet this mawnin', Miz Lizabeth.'

Sick, Lizabeth sat at the breakfast table and sipped black coffee. From where she sat she could see the corridor and a shard of the stairwell. Whether she wanted to or not, she kept listening for Maston's step on the stairs. She tried to reassure herself that he was too hungover this morning even to get up at all, but she knew better. Maston responded to a well-learned discipline; he might look and feel like the wrath of God, but he had a responsibility to his patients. Somehow, just now, this made her hate him more fiercely and unreasoningly than ever.

She waited, dreading to see him, yet wanting to get it over. Nothing happened. The house remained silent. Only inside her skull was there the terrible stir and rush and confusion that threatened to make her physically ill.

Seated at the table, Lizabeth felt her mind, as if somehow unhinged and freed, recede from dread into a dreamy, almost comatose state in which anxiety lost its sharpness and everything slipped just out of focus, the way things did when one drank too much. In her present state it seemed as if days had passed since she'd matched that red clay on her dress, Maston's boots and the shoe of his saddlehorse. In a kind of detached awareness, she saw that her marriage – as brief and unsatisfactory as it had been – was fragmented. She had failed Maston – *and keep thyself only unto him* –

herself – God knew all she wanted was to love and to be loved in return – her family. Her parents would be desolated if Maston divorced her; there was no such thing as divorce for decent people; marriage was an eternal road from which no one could turn back. She had been married once and had had two illicit lovers in less than a year. Remarkable, when you considered she did it without half-trying. She tried to smile, but her eyes brimmed with tears.

She heard the clock strike eleven times. The sound of that aged clapper seemed loud enough to waken the dead, and yet that corridor and the section of stairway she could see from the table remained silent and empty, ominously silent and empty.

Several times she was convinced she heard Maston – or glimpsed him – on the stairs, and her heart sank. But it was only her imagination, her fevered mind playing tricks on her.

She warned herself she had to be more prepared for meeting Maston this morning. She had to think ahead to what she could say, what she could do, what choices lay open for her.

She tried to assure herself that she didn't know for certain that the spy out there had been Maston. She drew little solace from this. Maston's having followed and trapped her with Tam was the worst possible thing that could happen. He had seen her out there all right. There was truly only one question left now: What was he going to do?

He could never forgive her; she did not even hope that he would; if their roles were reversed, she would not be forgiving. What did that leave for them? Would he demand a divorce? God knew he was within his rights, though a divorce would destroy her in the world in which they lived. A divorcee was no better than an admitted prostitute in Bible-belt society. The thought made her defiant: at least, the hypocrites will know *me* for what I am.

She could ask Maston for a divorce. The results would be

almost the same, except that terrible stigma of being a 'divorced woman' would be lifted. Would he be kind enough to grant that one last favour? After all, they'd had no marriage since his evil discovery of her pregnancy on their wedding night. Since then, she'd tried to entice him into her arms and into her bed and back into her life, but she had been able to prove only one thing to herself: he did not want her. And there were charges against him too. He had pushed her down the stairs. For this, she remained unforgiving. She was never meant to live the empty, celibate life he seemed to demand of her. Her sense of defiance mounted. The least he could do was give her a divorce; she would see a lawyer chosen by her father; she would demand it.

She tried to see beyond the empty brink of that precipice. If she did divorce Maston, what would she do? She could ask Tam to marry her, take her away from this inhibited, hidebound place. A woman didn't ask a man to marry her; this was shameless. She shrugged. By now, Tam knew her to be shameless. He liked that about her, her rash and reckless abandon intrigued and delighted him. Anyway, eloping with Tam Beauchard seemed her only escape, from this place and from this anguish.

She pushed her empty cup from her and sat, eyes brimmed with tears. There was one other faint hope. Maybe she could change, even now, if Maston would give her another chance. She could beg Maston's forgiveness, plead for another opportunity. She would ask only that he come to her bed; that he give her some hope for them. She felt herself heated with hatred for him when she saw in advance that he would reject her.

Long before she was ready, no matter how she steeled herself, Maston came downstairs. He walked slowly on the stairwell, his dulled eyes fixed intently upon the patterned runner. He was no longer drunk, though badly hungover. As always, whiskey poisoned him literally and left him depressed and withdrawn. He lurched once and caught at the bannister to steady himself.

She held her breath. When he came at last along the shadowed corridor to the dining room, she waited, tense, watching him. This morning, Maston looked different than she had ever seen him, grey and melancholy, pain and despair mingled in his eyes, and the liquor seemed to have hardened his face into an inscrutable mask. It was as if his eyes were fixed on something faraway, things she could never see or understand. Seeing him cold and forlorn like that shocked and terrified her.

She waited, but he only glanced in the door at her. The expression on his face did not alter. He walked on past, went across the kitchen, out of the back door and to his office without speaking to her at all.

Within thirty minutes after Maston silently left the house, Lizabeth followed. Wrapped in a shapeless grey cape, a wide, floppy brimmed straw hat with heavy veil concealing her face, she hurried out of the house and waited impatiently while Jim Watkins hitched up her buggy.

The short drive was slow going. The downtown streets of Tallahassee were crowded and clotted with poor and homeless blacks, starving freedmen, set adrift from their enslavement by a benign government who intended to do nothing more for them, and never had, though Lincoln had planned once to return all blacks to Liberia where they would be permitted to set up an independent nation. The liberated slaves migrated into the town in the wake of the Union Army of Occupation. Abolitionists had long promised these wretched people freedom, wealth, equality, security without labour, and now the ex-serfs swarmed in to find the anticipated milk and honey, to collect what long was due them.

Hungry, confused and frightened, they took what they wanted. They looted downtown grocery stores until the owners barred the doors and windows. They tried to share the wealth they saw around them and riots broke out, broken up by blue-uniformed soldiers who were no more gentle toward their black wards than the outraged rebels.

Keeping her face straight, her whip clenched in her fist, Lizabeth threaded her buggy through the streets to the Colonial Hotel. She paid a black boy a dollar to guard her carriage and hurried into the hotel.

She sent an urgent little note by a bellhop up to Tam's suite. The boy asked her to wait, and she sat miserable and uncomfortable for almost thirty minutes before Beauchard came down to rescue her.

He looked tired and she saw she had wakened him. He smiled faintly, if formally and said, 'Should you be driving alone like this, Lizabeth? My God, the streets aren't safe.'

'May I come up to your room?'

He glanced around. 'Of course. Then I'll see you get safely home.'

They walked in silence up the stairs. Lizabeth felt the eyes of onlookers burning into her. The hell with them; she certainly could not worry about what the citizenry thought of her.

The high ceilinged room was mussed and littered and still taut with broken sleep. The suite was familiar to her; she had been in it before, but this morning there was something unusual about it, a tension she found upsetting.

'I must talk to you,' she said.

He smiled, but overtly checked the gold watch which he took from his vest pocket. 'Of course,' he said. 'Any time. But I am slightly rushed this morning, *querida*. I'm on my way out to the Gates estate on business.'

'I wouldn't have come, but I had to see you.'

'Calm down. It will all be all right. It's just that I suggest you should be a little more careful than this. Even a heavy veil such as that one is less a disguise than you think. I have no desire to be shot by your husband – or another of your admirers.'

Enraged, she could barely speak for a moment. At last, she spoke in a cold and defiant tone. 'You can stop worrying. Maston knows I was with you yesterday up in that forest. It was he who spied on us. He saw us together.'

'Good God. What did he do?'

'Well, so far, Señor Beauchard, the only thing that seems to matter to you is what he hasn't done – he hasn't shot you, though he knows you were with me.'

'Dearest! Don't take such an angry tone. Whatever I said to upset you was in jest. I didn't know about your husband. I am sorry. Forgive me.'

She burst into helpless tears. She supposed the one thing she could not withstand was a kind voice. He put his arm about her and turned her veil back over her hat. 'Don't cry. Please don't cry. Somehow we will straighten it out. We'll take care of it. . . . It's not the end of the world. I promise you.'

'You don't know. I've never seen him like he is.'

'If he's cruel to you, I'll kill him.'

'He hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't said anything. Yet.'

He forced a smile. 'Well, there are you. Maybe he wants to keep you – no matter what he knows. Or what he has seen. Sometimes husbands are more permissive than we're led to believe. Some even get sensual pleasure from their wife's escapades.'

'Well, not Maston. He hates me. Nothing is more clear than that. . . . No. I'm here only to find out what will happen to me – if and when Maston divorces me.'

She felt his arm stiffen on her shoulder. 'Has he said he will divorce you?'

'I told you. He's said nothing. He walked out this morning without speaking to me. . . . I suppose as far as he's concerned I'm beyond forgiveness and it's all over between us.'

'But you don't know that.'

'I don't know anything. . . . That's why I came to you.'

He removed his arm from about her and walked to the window. He glanced down at the riotous street a moment and then turned back. His smile was gentle. 'What do you want me to do?'

Her chin tilted. 'What do you want to do?'

He tried to laugh and strode back to her. 'I want to take

you in my arms. I want to undress you and take you on that bed. But I've got to get out to South Gates. Old man Gates is waiting for me this morning. Ham wouldn't mind waiting. But old man Gates will be furious.'

'What do you want to do about us, Tam?'

'Us? What can I do? We'll just have to wait and see what happens. . . . Naturally, I don't think we should see each other for a while. No matter what your husband's mood, there is no sense challenging him, eh?'

'And that's all you have to say?'

He tried to take her into his arms. 'No. No, of course not. *Querida!* Tell me what it is you want.'

'I . . . I want to know if you would marry me – if I divorced Maston?'

He retreated a step and stared vacantly at something just over the top of her straw hat. She felt her throat choke with helpless tears. Nothing was as she wanted it. She'd hoped he would take her in his arms and comfort her and promise her that he would take care of her. All he wanted was to escape her, and swiftly.

'Please try to understand. I find you lovely. Beautiful. Attractive. Desirable. But this is a damned unfortunate situation, *querida*. We may as well face that. There may be violence. We don't know yet what your husband intends to do. If he wants to fight me, I'll certainly fight him. I don't know why it gives one an almost sensual pleasure to physically batter and destroy a man one has cuckolded. But it does.'

'But you don't want to marry me?' Her voice quivered, edged in hysteria.

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't really say anything.'

'Please, Lizabeth. Don't get emotional. Don't hate me. We are in this thing together. Just don't be impractical. Or hysterical. That won't solve anything.'

'But you don't want to marry me.'

He straightened and gave her an ingratiating smile that glittered with the cold steel supporting it. 'You are

determined to make me say it, aren't you, my love? *Amor mio*, as devoutly as I might wish it. As deeply as I care for you, there are certain insurmountable problems we would have to face if I even attempted to marry you. First, sweetheart, I am a Catholic. I am not a good Catholic, but my family is. Devout. They would disown me, disinherit me. The church would excommunicate me. My people would ostracize me.'

'And I'm certainly not worth that, am I?'

'Please. It wouldn't work anyway. I believe you would not want a poor Cuban boy, without income or position, or a church, or a family. I am not free, not yet, not independent of my father and my uncles. They control our import-export firm. I work for them. They control me. They could destroy me. And they would. You might have me, *querida*, but you'd have little else.'

'What you're really saying is, you wanted me only as long as I was married and willing to risk disgrace and ruin to entertain and satisfy you.'

'I didn't say that at all! Please, let's be civilized about all this. Let's see what happens. Let time work as it will. It will be for the best that way. I know it.'

Her voice lashed at him. 'You don't know anything,' she said. 'And that's the way you want it, isn't it? You don't want to know anything.'

He spoke gently. 'I love you.' He tried to take her in his arms, but she dropped the veil over her face from the brim of her hat and walked away from him.

'Wait,' he said. 'I'll see you home.'

She paused with her hand on the knob. 'The hell you will,' she said. 'I'll take my chances with the Negroes. After all, they don't *love* me, and they're as ignorant as I am.'

XVIII

She heard Maston come into the house about nine o'clock that night. She sat tensely in the parlour wing chair listening

to his step along the passage from the kitchen. Though she dreaded facing him, she realized she had to confront him sooner or later. And one truth she faced with cold pragmatism. She was at Maston's mercy now that Tam Beauchard had rejected her. If she were to escape disgrace and public humiliation, she had to plead for Maston's compassion for one very simple but compelling reason. She was trapped. She had nowhere else to turn.

He paused in the doorway to the entry. His face was pale and drawn, but the mask-like rigidity was gone. He stood with his hands at his side for a moment as if girding himself for the skirmish. She tried to meet his gaze boldly, but could not and her eyes sank under his. 'I wondered if you would be here,' he said at last.

'Why, where would I be?'

He shrugged. 'Here, I suppose. After all this is your nest – no matter how you try to foul it up.'

'Oh, Maston, isn't there any way we can be civil?'

'Frankly, I'm damned if I see how. I may as well tell you the truth, Lizabeth. I don't feel very civilized. If you don't want to talk to me now, that's all right. It can wait.'

He turned toward the staircase, but she cried out his name. 'Do come in. We can't put it off. You know we can't.'

'Oh?' His voice was bitter. 'I thought there was nothing left but who gets the silver, the owl with the clock in its belly.'

Her lips twisted into a lemony smile. 'Well, thank God you can joke, at least a little.'

'Would you rather I cried? Over what? Spilt milk?'

'You have every right to be angry and hurt.'

'Why thank you. I wondered if you'd see that.'

'I see everything, Maston. Truly I do. And I'm sorry. But I have betrayed you. There's no sense trying to ignore that.'

'It's the story of our marriage. At least, you have been consistent. You tricked me into marriage. You've spread your legs for any man who came along. Any man, but me.'

She jerked her head up resentfully. 'Please, Maston, be fair –'

'My God. Are we suddenly being fair? By whose rules? Which of us decides what is fair?'

'I wanted you to go to bed with me. I begged you. I did – everything I knew. . . . Whatever else you can say of me, you cannot deny that. . . . I told you I could not live in celibacy.'

'Oh, you did better than tell me, my dear. You proved it. Often and flagrantly.'

'All right! I don't pretend I was faithful . . . I cannot . . . It shames me. But I won't lie. I was unfaithful, but you must take part of that blame – you didn't want me.'

He stared at her so intently and so coolly that she almost cried out. When he spoke his voice quavered with suppressed bitterness. 'Oh, I might have come around. In time. After all, I did love you. I did marry you. But you wanted from me more than I could give – except one step at a time.'

She clasped her hands in her lap. 'One very slow step at a time.'

Now he laughed, a hard, sardonic sound that had nothing to share in it. 'I'm sure if we keep talking long enough, it will all turn out to be my fault.'

Her eyes brimmed with tears she refused to shed and she tilted her chin defiantly. 'I know who is to blame. I'm not shifting the blame. I ask only that you admit you were less than an ardent, devoted, even kindly lover – all the rest of the blame is mine . . . But why should I believe you wanted me? I could not even understand why you married me.'

He spoke so softly she could barely hear him. 'I married you because I wanted you. You were a great beauty. You were the best and I was born wanting the best – even when it turned out I didn't know what to do with it when I got it.'

She shook her head. 'What you are really saying is that I was not the best. I looked to be the best. But it was all fake. Under my so-called "charming" exterior, I was a tramp – and you were betrayed.'

'You're right, my love. I *was* betrayed. Not once, but many times. That first betrayal, ugly and unpalatable as it

was, I might have lived with. I saw that I'd married a totally unprincipled woman. But I didn't have any inkling then how unprincipled, how completely amoral. I could see that you were desperate; you were in trouble; you let me tumble headlong down that tunnel because I thought I wanted to. The blame wasn't all yours then. I may even have thought you might some time come to care deeply for me. You might love me as I loved you, if I were careful, if I gave you time. I doubt now that you ever would. You hardly knew I was alive until you found out I'd followed you and Beauchard into the pigtracks yesterday. But even that isn't the whole answer. I don't think you're too deeply infatuated with either of your lovers. In fact, I'm convinced, if you truly knew either of them you'd get rid of them quickly. But the truth is, you don't look outward at all. You're interested only in the gratification of your desires.'

She exhaled raggedly. 'Isn't everybody?'

He gave her a twisted smile, filled with anger and despair. 'Maybe. But everybody is not my problem. You are. You were. And so, even after I learned the truth about you at Wakullah, I stayed on, because I had run away before, and I knew I couldn't go on doing that. And so given the chance, you stuck the horns to me again and again. Many times. At first, a part of me still wanted you, even though I knew what you were. I didn't want to change you. But I find I don't want to people my house and my bedroom with the men who also want you as you are ...'

'What do you want to do?' She tried to speak clearly, but her words choked in her throat. Her fear, uncertainty and panic made her tense, and her tensions demanded immediate and violent expression. Only there was no outlet. He was so cold, so dead to her. She burst out, 'Do you mind sharing your decision with me?'

'Not at all. That's why I came home tonight.' He walked across the room and poured a drink of warm, straight whiskey into a tumbler from a cut-glass decanter. She watched him emptily. The room was suddenly a place of vague lamplight and forbidding shadows. She sat rigid. She

felt almost as if she dared to take a step in any direction, she would plunge over the edge of the world. But then, in irony, she knew better. A quick death was too easy.

She sat watching Maston, feeling doomed, abandoned by him, by Tam, and by those capricious gods who'd made her their pet since birth. She'd not been pretty. She'd been breathtakingly lovely. She'd seen that in a hundred admiring young eyes. She'd not had things handed to her, they'd been lavished upon her. She'd not had beaux like lesser girls, she'd broken hearts on a splendid scale, casually, and sometimes without even knowing. All that seemed suddenly gone and faded. It was as if something vital had been taken from her.

He finished off the drink and shuddered slightly. 'Maybe that's the problem. I've been in hell ever since I got here. A hell of my own making but a hell nevertheless. And I've had no respite – no let up, no release. I drink. But whiskey poisons me. I come home to this house and you have poisoned me.' He laughed and shook his head. 'I suppose I've known for months that it was over between us – I finally waited only to see how it would end.'

She gasped for breath. 'Then why did you have to sneak around and follow me like that – if you already knew?'

'I guess I had to know finally and precisely what you are. Divorce is a hellish step in these benighted times and in this place. And, even up to yesterday, I kept telling myself I didn't really know you. I had thought I did. But I knew nothing of what you are inside. I knew you liked to dance, picnic, shop, flirt, be endlessly admired. A very exciting and endearing little package. A supreme beauty. Unusual. Gorgeous. Heartwarming. But behind that beautiful smile, I had no idea how depraved you were, promiscuous, self-indulgent.'

She sighed. 'And now you know.'

'Now I know.'

'Why didn't you make your presence known? Up there? Yesterday? We could have faced it – openly – and honestly – right there.'

He laughed harshly. 'Open and honest? You?'

'Yes. I am honest. That's part of the reason we have failed. I'm honest with myself and I'm honest with you. Maybe I can't live to please the people in this town - '

'I don't give a damn what this city thinks. But I can't work and live in it when I'm the butt of dirty, snickering jokes.'

'You tried to make me live in a way I couldn't. I told you I could not live like that.'

'Obviously not. However, since you're being vindictive again, let's keep the record straight. It might be bad enough if this Cuban were your lover, a desire too strong to be denied. But he isn't even your first lover. You didn't wait very long to turn to that first one. I suppose you thought I didn't know. . . . It was just that, even then, I hoped you'd mature, come to your senses, do all the copybook things a woman is supposed to do when she gets married - forsaking all others. . . . But that's all over. Past. Finished. Done. I cannot and I shall not go on overlooking the way you flaunt your mongrel perfidy. . . . It's bad enough to lose you. But then, I never really had you, did I? But, I won't be made target of jokes and innuendoes and contempt. No matter how inconvenient that is for you.'

'And so you've decided to end it?'

He almost smiled, his face twisting, but the look in his eyes pained her. 'I've given it a lot of drinking time, my love. I could tell myself it was a lost cause. You have an illness I cannot cure. You are an illness against which I have no immunity. I've tried, and there's no sense throwing more effort into a hopeless case, is there? I could tell myself that no matter what sacrifice I make, I can never truly have you, no matter what I do. Then I should be able to walk away and let it go at that. But it's not even that easy. Unlike your transient lovers, I am married to you. I can't hold you, but by law I can't abandon you, either.'

'If a husband can't - and won't - satisfy his wife, it's not all her fault.'

'Oh, but we're past parcelling out blame, my dear. We're looking now for an acceptable way out.'

'You needn't be so goddamned honourable for me.'

'No. You're right. I gave up honour long ago. I am more dishonourable than you could ever be. I'm only trying to let you know what you *cannot* expect from me.

'I expect nothing from you. I learned early.'

He laughed at her. 'No, my love, you were born *knowing*. It was I who learned. The difference between us is that at least I loved you when I married you. I had only your promissory note and that turned out not even to be worth the paper you didn't bother to write it on.'

'All right! You hate me. I understand that. Damn you. What are you going to do?'

He stood staring down at her, his eyes bleak. 'Even now when I look at you, I can't believe so much has gone out of me . . . I never believed I could be so empty inside. It isn't you I hate, Lizabeth. I don't even hate you. If I am filled with anything it's hatred all right, but self hatred. I look at you. I see you for what you are. And yet I still see what I wanted you to be. I realize I have nothing left, and yet I can't let it die lightly.'

She shook her head. 'What are you saying, Maston? What do you mean?'

He drew a deep breath. 'That I can't let you go. That I won't let you go.'

She stared at him. She bit back hysterical laughter and gazed up at him, shocked and stunned.

'Why would you want me?'

'God knows. I cannot make you love me, or sleep with me, or be my wife in more than name only. But in this day and age, I am your husband, and more than your husband. I provide you board and lodging. By law I am your lord and master. By law you are no more than my chattel.'

She peered at him, suddenly chilled with apprehension. 'Maston, what's the matter? Have you lost your senses?'

He laughed. 'Do you mean, am I crazy? Did I see a burning bush on the way home? Have I seen the light? Am I a reborn Christian? Christ, I don't even know what a born Christian is. Am I crazy? I don't know. Maybe I am. That

would be the final poetic justice, wouldn't it? The final irony.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking about you, my little harlot. I'm talking about our marriage. I'm talking – God help me – about saving it, even now, not even because of you, but in spite of you.'

'Please. I don't understand.'

'Of course you do. You were right. When you said it was all my fault. You were right. I saw you at a distance and you were as dazzling as a butterfly. I wanted you and I kept after you until I got you. I got you and so I am to blame for everything. There's even a moral to the whole business.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The moral to our story. I'm afraid the whole shabby moral to be drawn is an ironic one. Butterflies are beautiful at a distance, but don't get too near. If you do you'll only find the corruption and ugliness of the cocoon.'

She stood up, shaking her head, her face pale. 'I don't know what you're talking about. I think you're drunk.'

'I'm talking about you, love. And I'm not drunk. Poisoned, but not drunk. Sober, cold sober. Even more cold than sober. I've been reading a great deal of Oliver Wendell Holmes lately on preventive medicine. I suddenly find myself a convert. I believe that with preventive medicine I can cure our ills. At least I'm going to try.'

She stared at him, troubled, hoping and yet not daring to hope. 'You want me? In spite of all I've done? All you know that I've done?'

'You don't understand. I don't know whether I want you or not. All I know is that I don't want to let you go. That's why I'm taking you with me.'

'With you? Taking me where?'

'To Port St Joe, my love. I admit your lovers can follow you there. But if they do, they may well pay with their lives – there is at present a yellow fever epidemic down there.'

'And you expect me to go to that pestilent place with you?'

'The local doctor died of the fever. There are midwives

and a few nurses. Three at last count, I think. But no doctors. They have urgently begged me to come down there.'

'You. Yes. But why me?'

'Whither I goest, my love. It's all part of that preventive medicine I was talking about.'

'You are crazy. What would I do down there? I know nothing about – yellow fever, sick people. I'd only be in the way. Terrified. Out of my mind with fear. No. I can't. I won't do it. You can't make me go.'

'No. You have a choice. You may stay here and I shall divorce you. And I shall lay before the open court every detail of your dereliction. You'll be free. But that's about all you'll be.'

'Oh God, Maston. I know you hate me. But do you hate me enough to take me into a place of pestilence – like that? I can't even believe you would permit me to go. It's incredible that you'd ask me to go.'

'I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. You are my wife. You are going with me. You'd better get a good night's sleep. We are leaving in the morning.'

XIX

Roads into Port St Joe were crowded with refugees fleeing in panic, fugitives from the solstitial pestilence.

Maston's carriage was, in fact, the only vehicle headed through the lowlands toward the fishing village on the sodden shore of St Josephs Bay. Summer rains had turned the roadbed to mud and urgent wagon wheels had churned that mud into impassable gumbo. Everywhere were logs and brush and signs of men fighting a bog that was almost like quicksand. Ditches overflowed with rainwater that no longer had anywhere to run off. The swamps were brimmed, green with slime and choked with debris so the water stood dead and lifeless, the black earth itself was saturated. Even the relentless sun seemed helpless to do

anything more than simmer steam out of those stagnant caldrons.

Gaunt, wild-eyed, terrified people hesitated long enough to allow the heavy-laden carriage to pass in the narrow aisle between the rancid elders, swamp fern and rampant vines. They stared in disbelief that a white man, a white woman and a black man should be travelling stolidly toward that hell-hole of plague from which they fled.

'Hold up, suh. People air a-dyin' worse'n flies in town yonder, mister,' an emaciated man called from his wagon. In its bed was a collection of his belongings and a pallet where his fevered wife lay unmoving. 'Wouldn't take the lady a step closer.'

'I'm a doctor,' Maston said.

The man was unimpressed. 'Doctor? Why, we lost three doctors a'ready in Port St Joe. Three of 'em. First to go. . . . Figure it to be some terrible contagion. A contagion passed in touch. Maybe jus' touchin' them patients what are infected. Anyway, they fell sick. Couldn't cure theyselves. They dead. All our doctors. All dead.'

Lizabeth sat straighter on the rear seat of the carriage. She bit back the sickness that gorged up into her throat.

They entered the fishing village in silence as they had ridden most of the way from Tallahassee.

They had begun the trek in an atmosphere crackling with hostility. When Lizabeth had come down from her bedroom wearing a grey travelling dress and smart felt hat, Maston had cocked his brow at her. 'Oh,' he said. 'Are you going?'

'You don't leave me much choice, do you?'

He'd shrugged and said nothing more. But she saw that he was surprised that she submitted. But he did not mention it again. She entered upon the journey in that sick dread one feels towards the unknown, plus the fear of disease and contagion she knew awaited her down there. But terror boiled up inside her when she heard Maston trying for the dozenth time to dissuade Jim Watkins from

accompanying them. 'You don't have to go, Jim. You can go back to Blackoaks. You can stay here. A freed man.'

'I seed them freed men, a starvin' and a-robbin' in the streets, Masta.'

'But they're alive. Somebody will help them. Somebody will have to. It's a disgrace not even the Republicans can turn their backs on. Down where we're going there's a yellow fever plague. It never strikes up here – less than fifty miles away. I don't know why. Nobody knows why. But it doesn't. There's something down there – something that causes these plagues every summer. You don't have to go.

'You goin', masta,' Jim said. 'I belongs with you.'

Lizabeth gasped. She felt an almost overwhelming surge of animosity moil up inside her. Damn him. Maston was dragging her along into a place where he felt it was too perilous for a black man. That was simple enough, wasn't it? He loved the black man. He hated her.

She clenched her fists tautly in her lap, sitting in the carriage, her chin tilted, like a Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine. Whatever noble motives others might ascribe to Maston's going into this yellow fever epidemic, she viewed it with jaundiced gaze. During the long, sleepless night she'd decided maybe he was risking his life in order to atone for having deserted the army. But then why would he have forced her to accompany him? No. She no longer believed he wanted to atone for anything. He was still a slacker, a deserter, a renegade runaway. Only now he ran from Tallahassee and the sneers and laughter he couldn't face. He ran, even when finally there was nowhere left to run except into hell – and he had dragged her with him, for only one reason, revenge.

There was nothing noble about his gambling his life against the plague. He wanted to get her beyond the reach of her lover. He wanted to make her pay for having betrayed him. Maybe – God forbid – he wanted her to die. He expected that she would not return from Port St Joe, any more than he would.

She shivered, shrinking inside herself, and grew more

silent than ever.

There was the look of a deserted place about Port St Joe, an abandoned town. Bronze John was abroad and where he stalked, yellow death swirled in his wake. That jaundiced hue seemed to enshroud the village, a haze unrelated to the sunlight and even contrary to it. There wasn't much to the town in the first place, a deep-water port, piers standing stark and vacant, any ships secure out in the roadstead. Stores and shops were closed, their windows drawn against the yellow plague. Those who stayed alive, huddled in terror, waiting, hidden when they knew there was no place to hide from Bronze John.

The silence was unsettling. Buzzards sailed high in a cloudless sky, soaring on drafts above the one and two-storied buildings in the single short red-brick street of the business section.

The first sound Lizabeth heard was a shouting, irregular and as mournful as tolling funeral bells. When they saw the dead wagon piled with bodies, Lizabeth chewed on her underlip to keep from crying out in panic. The sound was the cry of the Negroes who guided the cart, walking alongside of it, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the jaundiced dead. These were the Negro grave diggers – men who performed their job only because they were under armed white guards who stalked within gun-range of them, guns held ready. The Negroes cried out as they approached a house, 'Bring out your dead, bring out your dead.'

Lizabeth's eyes brimmed with tears, but she said nothing.

The village could no longer deny its contagion. Bronze John, that grim human exterminator was claiming victims without distinction of class, colour or religion. Former slaves died beside their bankrupt masters. Shopkeepers closed their doors one night and never opened them again, falling with chills and delirium of fever, face going bronze, darkening and blood oozing from lips, gums and nostrils. People hurried along the street, running in panic, stumbling

and falling, vomiting and dying in their vomit.

Only those who could not escape remained in the settlement. They had crowded upon the last boats out, and now there were no boats, except those that put into the bay, unloaded cargo in whale boats, and steamed away. All gulf, bay and river traffic now sailed wide of the port. Those who had horses and carriages departed. Roads leading away from Port St Joe were littered with the abandoned trunks and valises of those Bronze John overtook in flight. Death stalked the yellow-hued streets of the town, and there was no cure.

They passed huge bonfires burning in solitary splendour against the August heat at street intersections. They burned from sunset to dawn, the medical reasoning being that the flames would burn out the night vapours on which the yellow fever spread. Nobody knew whether the fires worked or not. No one could say they didn't; nobody knew what hell there might be without them. And anyhow, the blaze of the fire was somehow comforting. One dreaded dying in the black dark of night. Fire tenders sat all night, as far from the flames as possible. They drank whiskey and slapped at the swarms of mosquitoes blown in on the night winds from the swamps and salt flats. All day long any able-bodied men with horse-drawn carts plodded into mosquito-infested wetlands to haul out logs. Nothing slowed Bronze John. He even seemed to enjoy the crackle of the fires. People stumbled to their knees in the firelight, faces darkening hideously, and vomited the black fluid. Those who made it through one more night ran from death, or sat waiting for it because they could not abandon stricken family members. They lingered until it was too late and then their children died screaming in empty houses.

Lizabeth hugged her arms across her breasts. She spoke emptily. 'I cannot believe you could hate me so deeply. I can't believe you could hate anyone enough to bring them here.'

Maston glanced over his shoulder, his face grey. 'I don't hate you. A woman's place is beside her husband. After all,

bad as this is, we are together, aren't we?"

'You son of a bitch,' she said.

He laughed bleakly. 'Please, no swearing. Jim thinks all white women are ladies. Whatever will he think of you?'

'He's fool enough to come here with you, of his own free will,' she said. 'I don't give a damn what he thinks of me.'

The hospital was a sun-and-wind scabbed, sprawling, twenty-room, one-storied complex, prostrate on a slight rise overlooking the sanguine bay.

Maston pulled the carriage into the drive to its entry. He left Jim seated on the boot and helped Lizabeth alight to the pavement at the wide steps leading up to a screened porch which ran across the entire facade of the building.

She stiffened. 'I don't want to go in there.'

'Why not? You can't hide. Yellow fever will find you. Out here. In there. You're as safe one place as another.'

'It's - contagious.'

'Nobody knows.' He shrugged. 'It might be. People do get infected in crowded places. But they also die on isolated farms. Come on. Maybe you'll begin to understand why we're here.'

'I already know why we're here,' she said.

He did not bother to answer, but strode up the steps and opened the screen door. It whined on dry hinges. He held the door open. She hesitated a moment defiantly, and then coldly followed him. She walked past him and he let the door slam behind them.

The interior of the hospital was a shambles, a place without order or discipline, a place of apathy, human sacrifice, sorcery, superstition and torment. Halls were littered with soiled linens and towels and discarded clothing. Beds lined the corridors, many empty, all rumpled and untended. Odours of vomit, excrement, urine and that sweated terror of death hung over everything.

Lizabeth stopped walking as if she had bumped into an invisible wall. She shook her head from side to side involuntarily.

Maston paused beside her and then they moved forward,

holding their breath against the acrid stench of acids and disinfectants which burned through the sick-sweet aroma of putrefaction.

'Jesus Christ,' Elizabeth whispered. 'Is this a hospital or a pit in hell?'

'We'll try to find somebody in charge,' Maston said.

A black hospital orderly, a miserable and frightened looking man in soiled white ducks and blood-smeared denim shirt asked them to wait. 'I find the head doctor,' he told them.

A slender white man, somewhere between fifty and sixty-five came toward them, smiling diffidently. 'Are you Doctor Devereau from up at Tally?'

'Yes - '

'Well, I'm the doctor in charge. Ayres. Duval Ayres, suh. From up at Jacksonville. I arrived three days ago. As you can see I haven't been able to make any progress - even in house cleaning. But welcome, Dr Devereau. Welcome to you both.'

Elizabeth liked the aging medic on sight. One could not precisely reckon his age because of his smooth, unlined face and bright, vital blue eyes. Dr Ayres seemed packaged out of ideal medical fantasy rather than formed of mortal clay. He gave the outward appearance of being the perfect doctor, the kind of general practitioner one happily trusted on sight with one's life. His clothing was rumpled, sweated, shirt deeply stained at the armpits. His tie hung awry at his loosened collar. His hands looked antiseptic, coral, with gleaming nails, carefully pared. His hair seemed formed of light cotton puffs over a high forehead and deeply indented at his temples. His moustache blossomed cottony, his thick brows wiggled like albino caterpillars upon his scrubbed pink face. His genial smile was self-effacing. His heavy southern accent seemed to tug each word through hot, runny grits.

'Has the plague abated?' Maston asked.

'Hardly. The pestilence is spreading. There were a dozen deaths here in the hospital alone last night. God only knows

how many died alone at home or fell into their own black vomitus on the street.'

'What's being done?' Maston's tilted brow and glance at the littered corridors suggested he already knew the answer.

Dr Ayres shook his head. 'Ain't nuthin' bein' done. Nuthin' can be done, suh. As you well know. Yellow fever. Malaria. Dysentery. All of 'em are incurable. Fatal. We can make 'em comfortable as we can, but that's all. There ain't no cure.' He shook his head and laughed in a self-deprecating way. 'That's why I'm here.'

'Because it's incurable?'

'Because I know it's incurable. I'm getting old. I'm not really a very good doctor any more. No, sir. The young ones coming out of the army hospitals, from the colleges. All the new knowledge. I feel like I'm standin' on a roadbed and medicine is thunderin' by me on a express freight. You know? Hell, medical progress has long since passed me by. But I can't retire. I don't dare. So when the call came for volunteer medics down here, I came right on down. First train. Quite an odyssey. You take the wide-gauge to Lake City and then narrow-gauge splinter lines down through the pigtrack country. Took a spell. But I wasn't in any hurry. Knowed there was nuthin' I could do, once I got here, but look wise and speak gentle, and watch 'em die.'

'You don't believe there is any way to treat this disease?'

'I know there ain't. Just like you do. Oh, we can make 'em comfortable. We got plentiful supplies. Whatever we need we can get shipped in from Pensacola, Mobile. Ships anchor in the harbour, unload on whale boats and never touch land. They run like scared curs. God knows, I don't blame 'em. I knew they needed doctors. But they don't need *good* doctors down here. No offence intended, suh. If there be anything you can do to relieve the suffering, God knows these wretches will welcome it. But there ain't no cure. You an' I know that. We don't fool each other. I felt I was expendable. And that's why I'm here.'

He smiled benignly at them and then fixed his youthful

blue eyes on Lizabeth, nodding in appreciation of her beauty. 'That's why I'm here, ma'm. But you? As we young fellows used to say, what in God's name a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?'

For the first time in weeks, Lizabeth smiled. She glanced at Maston and then turned back to face the aging doctor. 'Trust me. I've earned my place here in hell.'

XX

Alone in the solemn, old parlour, her hair wrapped in a haphazard turban usually worn by slave girls, her blistered hands gripping a straw broom, Lizabeth looked about, distracted. She would not have believed one could have found oneself in such totally alien surroundings. She'd come from a loving, doting family, living always in the bright and familiar house in which she was born. Suddenly, she found herself living in the house of strangers, among strangers.

Moving the broom slowly across the patterned carpet, she tried to sort out in her mind the shattered fragments of her life. Though she could see Jim Watkins on his knees scrubbing the entry and passageways with lye water, she felt isolated, remote, abandoned in an unknown place.

Huge framed portraits of deceased strangers watched her relentlessly from the shadowed walls. This was to be her home, this prison, this deserted abode of a doctor who had lost his entire family and had himself succumbed to the agonizing yellow death. Mayor Ralph Peters himself had steered them from the hospital to this place. 'Everything is here,' he said. 'Everything you could want. It's just as Mrs Doctor Bales left it when she - passed on . . .' He smiled and patted Lizabeth's arm. 'I just know you're going to love it here.'

On the contrary, she hated it, and feared it, and dreaded to touch anything the ravaged family members might have touched before their agonized demise.

Fighting to keep her teeth from chattering, she said to Maston, as soon as they were alone: 'I can't live in this place. I feel suffocated with terror.'

'Of course you can live here. It's just a house. Quite a nice house. Solidly built. Twelve rooms. Fully furnished. Screened windows and doors. In the morning I'll hire some women to scour the place . . . You'll be all right.'

'What about tonight? I can't bear to – to touch anything.'

His brow tilted and his mouth twisted slightly in a dark smiling. 'You'd be amazed at how many more serious diseases are passed from human mouth to human mouth than are ever contracted from touching inanimate objects.'

'You're still a son of a bitch.'

'But I don't seem to have broken your spirit in the slightest, have I?'

'No, you righteous bastard. And you never will.'

She had spoken bravely and defiantly, but now she couldn't say how truthful she'd been. That night she had refused to sleep alone in one of the tomb-silent bedrooms. She had spread her own sheets over the made-up bed and Maston had lain down beside her to sleep. He had installed a netted *baire* and insisted that she sleep under it, though the night was breathless and humid.

She'd lain there sleepless, a faint aching deep in her throat, but Maston was exhausted and was soon deeply asleep. Her eyes brimming with tears, she listened to the night sounds, baying dogs, a distant panther, the rhythmic muzzing of mosquitoes swarming against the screens of the windows, the shouts of the loggers and the night guards, and, finally in the silence, the crackling of the street-fires themselves.

Nothing was as Maston had promised. Before he reported to the hospital the next morning he attempted to find charwomen who would scour and scrub down the interior of the old Dr Bales house. He could find no one at any price. Most were too superstitious to enter the home of the beloved dead man. Some admitted they feared ghosts of Dr Bales and his children. Others said they felt too

poorly to do manual labour, even in their own homes.

Maston had hurried in on his way to the hospital to report his failure. 'I'll leave Jim with you. He can clean better than a team of charwomen. . . . And he'll even teach you how to help him, if you wish.' His mouth pulled into a sardonic smile at the absurdity of this vagary.

She and Jim had worked without halt since that morning. She worked furiously though Jim warned her to start in moderation. The exertion, strain and effort of unaccustomed work soon had her aching in her bones, slightly nauseated and apathetic. Her hands blistered and the blisters tore.

Maston may have noticed her frantic drudgery, but if he did he gave no sign. She waited for one word of praise, commendation or encouragement. He was too hurried, too abstracted. He seemed hardly to see her in the next hectic days.

When he talked to her at all, if, infrequently, he came home to dinner, it was of ordinary matters. Though his body left the hospital, his mind seemed to remain in that abattoir. He was always deadly polite. He inquired unfailingly about her health; first thing in the morning, when he infrequently encountered her during the day, and just before she fell asleep under that damned and breathless mosquito netting every night.

'I'm all right,' she would tell him. 'Believe me, you'll know when I've got yellow fever because I'm saving all my black vomitus – for you.'

He grinned faintly. 'How devoted . . . it's these little acts of fidelity that reaffirm a husband's faith.'

Anger flared inside her. She wanted to lash back at him with something bitter and wounding, but she could think of nothing savage enough to relieve her inner resentment and indignation. She merely shrugged her shoulders.

When he walked to the door, he glanced back at her, his mouth pulled in a mocking smile. 'Promise me you won't work too hard,' he said. 'You must not get overtired. You must make sure you get plenty of rest. You must preserve

your inner energies.'

'What for?' she inquired in a flat and bitter tone.

He shrugged his shoulders, went on out the front door and closed it quietly behind him. She suddenly ran at the door and fell against it, dry-eyed and savage. She slapped her splayed, sore hands against its carved facing and stayed that way for a long time, as if her mind were blank. God knew, if only he'd raged and stormed at her, she could have matched his anger with the violence brewing inside her. She wanted to scream at him, look at me, look at me. I am here with you in this place. Give me that at least. Give me a chance. Don't leave me alone in this terrible place. Look at me . . .

But she remained silent, and smothered those emotions at war inside her. She met his mocking civility with her own brittle chill. She remained silent, withdrawn and silent.

Lizabeth looked up from her broom and her burning raw hands, aware that someone had spoken to her. Since there remained no one left in her constricted world except her husband's ex-body slave, she said, without turning, 'Yes, Jim?'

'You bes' let me finish this heah hard work, Miz Lizabeth. I never seed no white lady work so determined as you. You rest. Or maybe you could jes' do some light dusting whilst I finish up. Tain't too much lefted to do nohow.'

Lizabeth, accustomed to deference and servility and immediate attention to her least whim, felt tears suddenly burn hot in her eyes at this kindly tone she'd never heard from this servant before. He had always stayed at a distance. Now he seemed her only friend. She regretted now that she had suspected and resented him.

'Oh, Jim,' she said. 'Aren't you frightened – this terrible death all around you?'

He hesitated a moment, then nodded. 'Yes'm. I deep scared, all right.'

'But you didn't have to come.'

'I come 'cause I'm reckoned to go with Mast' Maston.'

'But you're not his slave any more. You're free. You don't have to stay in this awful pestilence.'

'No, ma'm, I don't noway have to stay.'

'I'll give you money. You can leave. If I can't get away, at least I can help you. . . . I'll give you a letter to my father in Tallahassee. You can take the next train.'

'That mos' kinely of you, Missy. And I thankee, ma'm. But I reckons I best stay heah. Long as Mas' Doc needs me.'

'My God. You're a fool.'

'Yes ma'm.'

She wiped the back of her hand across her leaky nose. 'Do you think I'd stay here one minute if I didn't have to?'

'No, ma'm, I'm sure you wouldn't. You a real determined little lady. With spunk. You a courageous lady.'

'No. I'm a coward. I stay here where I'm in terror because I'm afraid to leave.'

Jim nodded. 'Then you knows I stays 'cause I has to.'

'I'd run away. Any way I could.'

'Yes'm. You would. But I loves Mas' Doc, ma'm.' Jim's tone was gentle with no hint of judgment or reproof, but she caught her breath abruptly as if she'd been struck in the solar plexus sharply and without warning.

Maston sagged against a scoured wall of the hospital corridor and stared along its polished flooring with shards of sunlight dancing in it. He had been unable to hire or cajole workers into the old Bales house, but he forced the city managers – those still alive or in the vicinity – to send in every able bodied man and woman, white or black, to sanitize the hospital. Beds had been removed from the passages, or pushed against the walls, gleaming with clean sheets and fresh pillowcases.

He was slouched there, taking a brief recess in his twenty-hour day when Dr Ayres paused on the way to the front entry. 'You better get on home, Doctor, and get a few hours sleep,' Ayres said.

'I'm all right.'

'Fatigue may play as big a part in this yellow fever as anything else,' Ayres warned. 'You don't see me burning myself out. I come in at nine, and I'm here till noon. I take off four hours for resting and relaxing. No matter the emergency, I'm not to be disturbed. When I return in the afternoon, it's for an hour to look in on things. I leave the hospital – and all its problems and emergencies – promptly at five.'

Maston smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders. 'We'll muddle along without you.'

Ayres put his cottony head back and laughed loudly. 'Won't you though? I feel no attack of conscience, Doctor. You may try to deceive yourself, but I admit the truth. We're helpless against this epidemic. We can let it run its course and take its toll, and that's all we can do.'

Maston came home for dinner at six that night. They had been able to hire a cook; Jim had located a black woman in Negro town who was not afraid of ghosts in the old Bales mansion. She cooked plain meals, mullet caught in the bay and fried in a black iron skillet, grits and red-eye gravy with bread-pudding for dessert.

There was almost a gentleness in Maston's manner, though Lizabeth warned herself it was likely no more than fatigue. He spoke of unimportant matters, praised the cook on her bread pudding. The black woman nodded and smiled. 'Hits Mista Jim's favourite, suh. He tell me he mos' partial to my bread-pudding.'

Maston looked up, smiling. 'Well, well. I didn't even know Jim liked girls.'

The cook giggled. 'You teasin' me, Mas' Doc.'

'No . . . No. Bread pudding is probably one of the firmest bases for a warm friendship.'

The woman giggled again. 'We jes' friends, Mas' Doc . . . We ain't all that warm.'

'Not yet you're not,' Maston said, with tongue in cheek. 'But you just keep on making that bread-pudding and . . .'

The cook laughed and covering her face with her apron, retreated into the kitchen.

Lizabeth watched him covertly. Tears welled into her eyes and she averted them to conceal their glitter. Her heart felt pleasantly warm, looking at him. She saw him as she'd never really looked at him before, gentle and warm and incredibly handsome even through the exhaustion that greyed his face and drew down the corners of his wide mouth. She longed to tell him how she felt, but she knew better, and rejection hurt too badly. There was no use.

'Are you staying home this evening?' she inquired at last.

He looked up and shook his head. 'Don't worry, my love. No. I won't be here.'

'If you care,' she said in a sharp tone, 'I hate and dread being alone here all the time. I live in agony of fear in this dark house.'

His smile was wry. 'Does that mean you'd prefer even my company?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'It doesn't mean anything,' she said. 'Except maybe that death isn't the worst thing that can happen to you.'

'I'm sorry you're unhappy and bored. No. Truly, I am. I was going to invite you to a town meeting I've called at the hospital this evening, if you'd care to go.'

She shook her head involuntarily. 'Is it safe to crowd people into one place?'

He exhaled. 'Dr Duval Ayres' exact question. He opposes this meeting on those precise grounds. Threat of contagion in crowds. But he will attend. Reluctantly. I'd be pleased to have you. If you'd care to go.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Why not? It can't be any worse than dying of boredom – alone here.'

Between fifty and seventy of the village citizens were gathered in the public waiting room just inside the screen porch when Maston and Lizabeth arrived at eight. Dr Duval Ayres indeed chaired the meeting, but his reluctance was evident in his cherub-pink face. He bowed deeply and smiled toward Lizabeth. She nodded and returned his smile.

When Maston pushed his way to the front of the room,

Dr Ayres pounded with a wooden lab mallet upon the desktop. 'This heah meeting will come quickly to order. I can tell you, as a medical man, that I am less than pleased with this gathering of crowds in one place during times of pestilence . . . Dr Devereau, whom I'm sure you all have come to know and respect – as I have – these past days, will tell you why he has called us here.'

Maston gave them an abstracted smile. He spread his hands. 'I figure if you people are well enough to be here, you probably aren't contagious. Anyway, this is a leaky boat, and we're all in it together.'

Mayor Ralph Peters leaped to his feet. 'Let me speak for us lay folks, Doc Devereau. I can tell you why most of us come. I know why I'm here. And most of us feel the same way. We want to know what you medical people can do against this here hellish epidemic – it's come damn nigh to wiping out our town.'

Others agreed, speaking loudly, nodding and glancing at their neighbours for support.

It seemed to Lizabeth that Maston's wide slender shoulders sagged almost visibly. Yet he smiled in a reassuring way. 'I can't promise you any miracles. Medicine may be twenty years away from cures for malaria and yellow fever. I don't know. We will do what we can. We'll try something and if it works, we'll try it again. And again, until it proves itself or fails –'

'And meantime, we go on dying?' somebody shouted.

Maston winced and nodded. 'If we can't save you, yes. . . . What we are up against is tragic – but it is basic. We simply don't know – nobody *knows* what causes malaria and yellow fever. Until we find its cause, we can't find a certain cure. We have made progress. As recently as thirty years ago, renowned physicians were still bleeding malarial victims in an attempt to save them. At least, we know better than that. A Dr John Crawford in 1793 maintained that diseases like yellow fever, malaria and dysentery were due to virus transmitted by insects. Few listened to him then, few believe his theory now. Those who did listen to Dr

Crawford did so only to lead the choruses of contemptuous laughter that silenced him – ’

‘And to which I add my own contemptuous snigger,’ Dr Ayres said loudly. He nodded and winked toward the people directly in front of him. The crowd laughed.

‘By 1798, the editors of the new annual, *Medical Repository*, had written extensively about noxious insects, but not even they believed mosquitoes or flies or fleas were truly responsible for sending thousands to their graves and wiping out whole cities in a single summer.

‘It’s what we don’t know that stops us. We don’t even know why Port St Joe is struck every year by this plague, while less than a hundred miles in the hills north of here, such outbreaks are unheard of in towns like Tallahassee.’

‘It’s the work of God.’ A Baptist minister leaped to his feet. ‘It is punishment for our sins. For a year I have pleaded with my flock to repent and to turn from evil. We are being struck down by a righteous God.’

‘I won’t speak against your religion, sir. Or your right to find in tragedy the hand of God. But my own God is less than vengeful. He happens to be a gentle and compassionate God – and yet I am as subject to this pestilence as the worst sinner masquerading in your pews on Sunday.’

‘Look for your own sins in your own heart,’ the minister shouted.

‘Oh, I know my own trespasses, Pastor, but they do not cause yellow fever – except in my own heart.’

‘As Almighty God smote down Sodom,’ the minister warned, shaking a clenched fist above his head.

Maston sighed heavily and waited until the surf-like roar quieted in the room. ‘I have called you here to tell you what I think we might do to alleviate suffering as far as is possible with our presented limited knowledge. I happen to believe, with all my medical mind, that malaria, yellow fever and dysentery are indeed caused by Crawford’s unsuspected virus. I am not a bacteriologist. I do not know what insects

or parasites are guilty. Would God that I did know.

‘I also believe – and have believed for some time now – which is the reason I came here – because I thought, even as limited as our knowledge is, I might be able to help. I believe the only way to fight a disease such as plagues this town and kills our loved ones – a disease for which there is no cure presently known – is through “preventive medicine”.’

Even Dr Ayres turned ostentatiously in his chair and stared with the laymen in gape-mouth uncomprehension at Maston. Dr Ayres played to the crowd. He shouted, mockingly. ‘Preventive medicine? What in hell kind of snake-oil remedy is that?’

Maston smiled. ‘It only means if we can’t cure the disease, we might be able to stop – those “unknown viruses” – before they strike.’

Dr Ayres put his head back, laughing. ‘And which “unknown virus” is that, Doctor?’

Maston’s tired voice lashed back. ‘How in hell would I know?’

Dr Ayres nodded appreciatively, playing to the audience. ‘That’s what I figured – I’m just an old country-boy doctor, but that’s what I figured.’

The mayor waited until the crowd subsided, then he said, ‘We ain’t in no enviable position here, Doctor Devereau. We got the devil by the tail and can’t let go. We ain’t in no position to quibble. Maybe we don’t all understand all you’re saying – but we respect you – and anyhow, you are the only one to come forward with any hopeful ideas at all . . . We’d like you to tell us what you think we ought to do?’

‘We must test,’ Maston said. ‘We have supplies. God help us, it’s people we’re running out of. We must boil every drop of water – not only the water we drink, but that we bathe in, or wash our hands in, or wash our clothes in. It may not be the water. I don’t know. But we can find out by boiling every drop we use, every drop we touch.’

The crowd agreed, nodding and mumbling their assent.

'The microbes may come from open outhouses which have been flooded by the rains,' Maston said. 'I don't know. But I do know we should pour lime in those pits and burn the outhouses - '

'Burn the outhouses.' A man laughed helplessly and shook his head. 'They a mighty big part of our lives - '

'They may be killing you too,' Maston said. 'But we won't know until we do away with them. We could set up public, limed outhouses downtown - until this crisis passes.'

There was general agreement again, but it was less enthusiastic. 'What about our slop jars?' a stout woman asked.

'You take them everyday to the public facility and pour them into the lime,' Maston said.

'One thing I'll say for you, Doc.' An aging, gaunt-looking man stood up. 'You got us doing something. You got us hopin'. . . . I lost my wife an' my daughter - and I say to you - God bless you. You ask me and I help you.'

Maston nodded. 'Thank you, sir. It's a big job, and maybe it's too big. But it is something to do. It gives us a chance to fight back - with preventive medicine. I think we ought to send out fire-crews and burn all the swamps bordering the town, back-burn for a distance of five miles. We must drain those stagnant ponds that ring this low-lying town - we must clear low-lying fields.'

'How?' Mayor Peters wanted to know.

'Fire. That's quickest. Pour coal oil into the ponds and burn anything that will burn.'

The mayor stared at him. 'What you're really saying is to burn our town to the ground.'

Maston straightened. 'If it comes to that. If we're all dead, it won't matter, will it?'

The exhausted mayor spread his hands in frustration. 'My God, Doc. I agree with Ersel Thompson there. You ask and I'll help you because I know - in your own way - you're trying to save us. You're giving us something to do so we don't just stand here and wait to die. . . . But I got to tell you, publicly, Dr Devereau. I figured you had to be

crazy when you answered our plea to come into this pestilent place, but now I'm afraid you ain't only crazy, but you are also insane. ...'

XXI

Lizabeth sat idly in the parlour sipping a solitary cup of tea made from thrice boiled water. When she heard the firm rapping at her front door, she started up, almost guiltily, shocked and astonished that she would have a caller in the middle of the afternoon. Whom did she know in this pestilent place? She could answer that quickly. Nobody.

Since the night of the town meeting at the hospital, Lizabeth found herself increasingly alone and lonely. She had returned home from the hospital with Maston in a kind of glow; she felt a pride in him; it was impossible not to see how highly he was regarded by these bedevilled wretches; he was their only hope. He had stirred them to action and they had responded. She found herself responding to him too. When they got back in the old Bales house she told him, hesitantly, how well he had handled matters, how proud she was. He smiled faintly and came toward her and, for a hectic moment, she thought he was going to take her into his arms. She wanted him to hold her in his arms, protectively, as he might caress a child frightened in the night. God knew she was frightened; she lived in a state of fear; she was panic-stricken. She needed to be comforted, even if only for a moment. And then, perversely, she wanted more from him. She wanted him to whisper that he forgave her, he was sorry he had been cruel, and they would start over. She could feel the savagery of his kisses on her mouth and she shivered in anticipation. But nothing happened, he only removed her light cape and hung it on the hall tree in a corner.

Maston was gone the next morning when she wakened in the bed she shared with him. He slept with her every night, but he seldom touched her, never, except accidentally, in

his sleep. Often, she sprayed herself with pleasing musk and crowded him on their gelded mattress, but she could sense the way he withdrew in the dark. This sickness added to her panic. Maybe that man at the meeting was right, maybe Maston was insane. Else why would he keep her in this hellhole when he didn't even want to use her body, or share her life? He knew even better than she the way her life was forfeit in this place. He either didn't care, or he wanted it that way. If he wanted to kill her – no matter what hurt she'd done him – he must be insane, and she spun in her mind ways she might escape. She would go back home, but she sagged, ill. If she went, she would be divorced, ruined in the eyes of her parents and society. She wanted to run away to safety, but for her there was no such place.

She had no life at all with Maston. He hurried off to the hospital without even coffee at dawn, he infrequently returned for lunch, and came back at night only in deepest darkness. She lived in her abyss of loneliness.

The knock at the door was repeated and she sat forward in her chair, disbelieving, almost afraid to answer. She could hear Jim Watkins talking softly with the giggling cook Sarah in the kitchen. She heard the crackling of distant fires and her heart sank.

She got up slowly, looking around her as if less than certain even where she was. She didn't want to see anyone, she didn't want to accept any messenger at her door. Not in these evil times.

She swallowed hard. She had adapted to her loneliness in these hot, steamy weeks in this ancient old house. Adapted. That was what she had done; that was all she had done. At that, she was a little proud of herself. She supposed those who survived any trauma were those who adapted themselves to it. They were the ones who said to themselves, this is the way it is, I can't change it, and I can't let it destroy me, and so the hell with it. I'll live with it, no matter what it does to me. She tried to keep busy around the house. She worked in the kitchen garden with Jim. She made a scarecrow of croker sacking, an old coat and hat

that had belonged to the late Dr Bales. Jim had complimented her; he had never seen a better looking scarecrow. Sarah taught her how to cook, and especially how to make bread-pudding from left-over loaves. It wasn't much of a life, but it was hers, and it was all she had. She had the sense that even this routine was threatened, though she could not say why.

When she opened the front door, she stared at Dr Duval Ayres. The pink-flush of his face was exaggerated. His breath smelled sharply of fresh mint. At first she felt a flaring of impatience.

'May I come in?'

She sighed and nodded. She stepped back and he walked past her into the parlour. She called to Sarah to bring fresh tea and followed him into that sombre old room.

In the vague light, she could see his face glowing. He glanced around. 'You wonder about the people who lived here, don't you?' he said. 'What they were like? What they did?'

'No.'

He put his head back laughing. 'You are an intriguing woman, Mrs Devereau. I suppose you're not even wondering why I am here?'

She shrugged her lovely shoulders noncommittally.

He laughed. 'May I sit down?' And when she nodded, gesturing toward a wing chair near the open window, he sat in it with his derby hat on his knees. 'I came for several reasons. Let's take them in the order of their importance. I need civilized association or I shall lose the power of speech. You're the only civilized woman in the area, though God knows why you came here. Even this excites my curiosity about you. Second, I hope we may be friends. And finally, I truly am worried about your husband.'

'Maston?' She sat forward in her chair, her face pale. 'Maston? What's the matter with him?'

'Obsessive dedication would be my diagnosis,' Dr Ayres said with a smile. 'He works too hard. It's almost – for

God's sake – as if he believes there is something that can be done for these people. I believe the death rate for victims of yellow fever and malaria to be somewhere between ten and seventy per cent. Even those who survive are seldom the same again. With malaria, recurring attacks of chills and fever, rendering the victim almost as helpless as epilepsy. Our mortality figures are higher. Ninety per cent of the diseased have died since I've been here.' He said this with a faint tone almost of satisfaction.

'What about Maston?'

'Don't you think he works too hard, hours too long?'

'No matter what I might think, Doctor. There is nothing I can do about it.'

'Well, you'd better do something about it. Or you may find yourself abruptly widowed. You'll make a lovely young widow, I agree, but I don't think black will become you.'

'You sound as if you don't give a damn about Maston.'

'Of course I care about young Dr Devereau. If anything I was trying to match your own tone. . . . I admire Maston Devereau. He is everything I am not. Perhaps I was like him once, back before the battle of Hastings . . . I'm not a very good doctor any more. In fact I'm a damned poor excuse for a physician. But I am a delightful human being, much more so now that I am a failed medic. I find I have a newfound humility, a deep compassion, an understanding I never had when I was a competent doctor, seriously pursuing my practice.'

'It's a very brave thing you've done, coming here.'

'No. I told you. I am expendable. An old workhorse that should have been put to pasture long ago. But this is not true of your husband. He could have had a brilliant future. If he somehow escapes this pestilence – and the odds are slim that he will, the way he is working without rest, among the most virulently ill – he may still be an outstanding physician. He has something many medics don't have after they've been in practice for a while. He cares. He still cares. And that's it. He cares too deeply. Human suffering is his

suffering and that's one luxury no doctor can permit himself.'

Lizabeth felt her eyes brim with tears. Suddenly, seeing Maston through Ayres' eyes, she knew why he had run away from the siege of Petersburg: he could no longer endure the suffering of those wounded men, suffering he was helpless to alleviate. He had not deserted the agony of those men, he had run from the very insanity of war. Poor Maston. He had destroyed his life, become a renegade, a runaway, a deserter.

She sat in a prolonged moment of silence and stared through the oriel window at the stricken town. Smoke billowed and seeped like grey sludge across the face of the sky from every direction. For days after the swamps, fields and quagmires had been incinerated, a haze remained between the earth and the heavens. Even at high noon, the sun was visible with the wan orange glow of a sunset fireball. Dr Devereau's fires, they called them, and set them systematically and faithfully. The pall and smell of woodsmoke permeated everything. Outhouses were burned, flaring up swiftly, and the smoke curled on the updrafts. The whole region was a place of blackened stubs, seared, leafless trees. Great powdery puffs of soot swirled restlessly on every vagrant breeze across the desolate landscape.

'You must insist that your husband pace himself. I work four hours in the morning. An hour late in the afternoon. Otherwise, I stay clear of that hospital, and I refuse to make any housecalls.' Lizabeth was aware that the aging medic had been speaking for some moments. 'Maston Devereau must emulate me, or he will fall. I've tried to warn him. He simply won't listen to me. I pray – for his sake – that he will listen to you.'

'Why should he?' she inquired.

After that first tea, Dr Duval Ayres showed up at her front door each afternoon promptly at two. He stayed until four. Her impatience quickly faded and soon she looked forward

to his arrival; she did not know what she would do with herself if the old doctor did not come. She anticipated his visits. She even had Sarah prepare torts and jelly-rolls and cinnamon buns and cream cones because the doctor had an enlarged sweet tooth.

But more than that he was a fount of information; he was her contact with the hospital, with the outside world. Dr Ayres was a born gossip; he loved to talk, he doted on an avid audience which she provided.

He told her in vivid detail about the horrors inside the hospital. She got her only information from him. When she asked Maston about his day, he only shook his head and smiled at her. 'It's incredible,' he said. And that was all he said. From Duval she learned that scores of people had died over there since their arrival; their survival rate was almost nil. The dead were stacked out on the front screen porch to await the gravediggers. Bottleflies batted against the screens as loud as slapping hands.

But Ayres preferred to retail the gossip of the hospital. The widow who stood weeping at the bed of her dying husband and then, bereaved, fell into the arms of her lover and went away with him, not even claiming her spouse's body when he died. She found that he seldom missed anything. He was the genial sort to whom people poured out their innermost secrets, and he was like a sieve. He could make any story bright and charming, no matter how sordid it might seem, because he had his own odd slant on life. She found it amusing and she liked him. She had needed a friend in this place and now she felt she had found one.

They sat over tea and sweet cakes and she laughed at his gossip, from the hospital, the town and from his letters. He told her the latest excesses of the Union Army of Occupation up at Tallahassee, the way ruinous taxes were being levied, even on friends of the Union like the Gates family. He knew intimately all the families of the friends from Jacksonville with whom she'd gone to finishing school.

She began to feel more and more at ease with him. She felt tempted to tell him her whole shabby history with Maston and to beg his counsel. The truth was she did not see how she could endure this strange imprisonment. She had to talk to someone, and Duval Ayres was the only friend she had.

Often, she found herself on the brink of pouring out her story, but always something stopped her at the last minute. What it was was simple enough. By now she knew no secret was safe with Duval Ayres. And she grew almost physically ill at the thought of revealing unflattering truths about herself, and there was no way to discuss what she had done and make it less than derogatory. She was unwilling to lie about it at this juncture. She simply couldn't bring herself to say anything, as badly as she needed a sympathetic listener to share her anguish.

It seemed to her that anguish was all she had left. She told herself that she was lovely, more beautiful than she had ever been, even with her eyes stricken and haunted by terror. She wanted to rely on Maston, she wanted to be protected within his arms. When he went on ignoring her, she told herself she detested him, but then admitted hatred could be the other side of the coin of love. Even now she could love Maston, no matter what evil he had done her, she could forgive him and love him, if only he would let her.

She tried in a hundred ways to waken the passion he must have felt for her before he'd touched her that night at Wakullah. When he remained cold and distant, she lay empty-bellied beside him in the darkness of their bedroom. But when she slept she dreamed of him. In her dreams he was the warm and exciting lover she was certain he could be. Her own tears wakened her. Then, enraged, she tried to put him from her mind, to escape him in her thoughts, even if she were chained to him in a loveless marriage. She let her mind drift back to Tam Beauchard and even to Hampton Gates and to those fiery afternoons she had spent with them, secluded and impassioned and mindless with need. In a light sleep she felt Tam's kisses on her face and she

clung to him and opened her body to him, and then at that instant they reached the highest point of sensual delight, Tam's voice became Maston's voice and Tam's face was abruptly Maston's face, bent close over her, cruel and mocking.

She awoke, with the back of her hand clamped between her teeth to keep from crying out.

Her days were empty and hot and lonely, broken only by the brief little soirees with Dr Ayres. Her nights were tormented with dreams. She saw herself laid out in her casket and mourners were passing for the last viewing. She lay there worried about the way they'd fixed her hair and painted her face and as the visitors came near she heard the cries of the black gravediggers. 'Bring out your dead. Bring out your dead.' And they were burying her in an old dress left in the house by the late Mrs Doctor Bales and the fabric smelled of woodsmoke.

She felt she was losing her mind. The race now was narrowed between the yellow fever and the shattering of her sanity.

She realized that Dr Ayres was speaking in his soft, heavily accented, self-taunting voice, and had been for some moments. She forced herself to smile and nod, having no inkling of what he'd said.

'I've told Maston a dozen times those who die of this plague are the lucky ones. The ones who live are jaundiced, doomed to attacks of chills and fever, and never another well day in their existence. Let them die, I tell him, let them die in peace.' He glanced toward the foyer door and lowered his voice. 'I tell you true, Lizabeth, I feel that Maston is the villain in their lives, while I am their angel of mercy. Oh, yes, I am. You think because I don't spend my life in that virulent pesthole of a hospital that I am not serving this town and serving it well. I am doing, my dear, just what I came here to do.'

He paused dramatically and to please him, though she really did not care in the least, Lizabeth asked him. 'And what was that, Duval?'

He lowered his voice again slightly. 'This is for your own sweet ears, and yours alone. It's not that I'm ashamed, or feel in the least guilty. But God knows, bereaved people, and the law, may be less than understanding. You see?'

'Not yet,' she prompted.

He laughed and reached out to pat her hand. 'I love to talk to you. You're so totally honest. That's why I feel I can be honest with you. More than that, I am almost compelled to total honesty.'

'Don't tell me anything you don't want to.'

'Oh, but I want to tell you. I told you I wasn't a good doctor any more. But I am an angel of mercy. I go there among the hopelessly ill, and I dispense laudanum and kind words. The kind words give them hope. The laudanum lulls their nerve centres and they don't suffer for a while. Then toward the last, when nothing is left but the black vomitus and death, I dispense a drop of strychnine when no one is looking, of course.'

Stunned, not even certain she'd heard the aging doctor correctly. Lizabeth kept her face carefully composed so that he would not see how shocked she was. She forced a wan smile, while behind her bland eyes, her mind spun. No wonder the recovery rate at the hospital had been nil all these weeks. It did not matter how faithfully Maston worked over there, any patient brought through that emergency door was slated to be piled on the porch awaiting the dead wagon. While Maston fought to save any lives he could, Ayres only soothed the ill with opium to dull the pain and then when he saw their faces grow bronze, he quietly administered strychnine. 'I ease them gently into the night,' she heard him say.

When Dr Ayres left at four, Lizabeth sat mulling over what he had so casually admitted to her. It had horrified her to hear it and though she did not let him see how deeply it affected her, she felt sick inside. She saw his pink cherubic face in a new light: those bright blue eyes glistened with a new cynicism and emptiness. He was proud of his

achievement. He could not cure yellow fever but he robbed Bronze John of his triumph. He spared the dying victims those last hours of black vomitus and agony. And he sat there, smiling, with pleasant eyes, a pink face and warm smile, calmly drinking his tea.

When Maston came home after ten that night, pale and thin with exhaustion, she felt a terrible wave of pity rush through her. But when he rebuffed her kindness, refused to allow her to remove his boots or bring him hot tea, she hated him again and she didn't care what Duval Ayres did to him. She despised him and all she wanted was to get away from him.

'I can't go on like this,' she said suddenly.

His abrupt, twisted smile was almost sympathetic. 'My sentiments exactly. I look at those faces, I look at the dead stacked like cordwood on that screened porch and I want to run away.'

'I do hope you'll take me with you when you go.' She forced her tone to match his, brittle and nonchalant.

He glanced up, his cheeks sunken, his eyes ringed with darkness. 'I think about it,' he said. 'I don't plan it. When I get very tired I think about it. . . . It doesn't mean anything, Lizabeth. . . . I'm not going to run away again. I just get tired. Everybody gets tired.'

'If you're staying because you're trying to atone for deserting the Glorious Cause, you're a fool. I can tell you Dr Ayres, that most respected physician from Jacksonville has more to hide than you ever will, even if you live to be twice his age.'

He gave her an odd look that upset her. 'It doesn't matter, Lizabeth,' he said. 'I don't want to know about it. I don't care what anyone else has done. I've truly learned only one thing in this life – you're a fool to judge and a bigger fool to be affected by judgment. We're all alike. All tarred with the same stick.'

'Then why don't you give it up and get out of here?'

He shrugged and did not say anything more. . . .

She watched for Duval Ayres' arrival the next after-

noon at two. She stood at her window and watched him cross the blackened scorched earth under a pitiless sun. He walked with a little strut, swinging his cane, his derby tilted rakishly down over his high forehead. One thing she was thankful for. Duval's careless admission of euthanasia had solved a problem for her. Now she could tell Dr Ayres anything she wanted to. Nothing she could say would ever be as self-incriminating as his amiable confession to her.

And so, as soon as he was seated and relieved himself of the freshest gossip he'd gathered like a bouquet of nosegays to bring her, she said, 'I know you wonder why I came here with Maston?'

'Wondering? My dear, you're killing an old man. What I am is dying of curiosity. . . . I am not blind. I can see that you and young Devereau have less than an ideal marriage. In fact, in the old-fashioned sense, you have no marriage at all. In my day a wife belonged to her husband. You belong to no one. But Maston not only accepts this, he seems not even to give a damn. . . . Yes, my dear, I certainly do wonder about you two.'

She began to speak, slowly, hesitantly, then gaining strength and confidence as she saw that nothing she could say would shock Duval Ayres. Any road you have been down, my dear, his smile seemed to say, I've already been down that same road, at least twice.

Thankfully, she told him everything. She spared neither herself nor Maston. She named names and described places though this seemed to her, even then, less than discreet because Duval Ayres chattered like a guinea hen. By the time she brought him down to this fearful present, she was weeping, in self pity, in relief, in release, in disillusion that life was so little one wished it.

He showed no shock. Nothing she said even seemed to surprise him very much. 'I know I have indicted myself,' she said. 'You must hate me. I've shown you how empty and amoral I am.'

He smiled faintly. 'Maybe you're not empty or amoral at all. Maybe your ideals are so high and your expectations so

lofty that you see minor vices as deadly sins.'

'No. My sins are deadly. I admit my guilt.'

'All you've done, as far as I can see, is to reveal your humanness. You are as God made you, Elizabeth. We let religious zealots and bigots set impossible and inhuman standards for us, and we are consumed with guilt when we find we are only human after all, only as God made us. In His image; I'm told.'

'You make it sound so easy.'

'My God. It is easy. Or it would be if you could look into the hearts of strangers and friends and closest ties around you, and find their own hidden secrets.'

'All tarred with the same stick,' Elizabeth whispered. 'Maston said that last night.'

Dr Ayres laughed softly. 'I hope you weren't speaking of me at the time.'

Elizabeth's head jerked up. 'Of course not,' she said. She told him that she would never betray his confidence to anyone, though she admitted she had wanted to warn Maston last night, and would have, except he would not let her do it.

'What I still don't see is why, when you had an option – even of divorce – you came down here into this pestilence,' Ayres said.

'I knew I didn't really have an option. I couldn't count on my father's taking me back in the house after a ruinous scandal blackened his name. His reputation is about all he has left. He is a State Supreme Court Justice. He can't even seem guilty, or even very human.'

'And you think he might not be?'

'I don't know. I know a divorce would break his heart. A scandal such as Maston threatened might even have killed him.'

'I still can't believe you would put yourself in certain jeopardy.'

'That's because you didn't know how depressed and low and hopeless I felt. I felt doomed. I felt I was being punished for vile sins. I told you, I literally was abandoned.'

I told you. Tam Beauchard was most sympathetic about the rift between my husband and me, but he is Catholic, and no Catholic can marry a divorced woman, not even if he's the reason for the divorce.'

Dr Ayres smiled and shrugged. 'Don't mistrust one religion more than another. Under the ceremony and the ritual, they're all alike. For a profit. In Christ's name, of course.'

'And I came because suddenly I was fatalistic. I felt if I were going to die, it might as well be of yellow fever – though I admit to panic at the thought.'

'It is one of the most frightful ways an uncaring nature has devised for beings to die,' Dr Ayres said without smiling.

'I came with Maston most of all because I didn't want to be left behind – up there in Tallahassee – in the mess I'd made. I could face malaria better than I could face my former friends and family.'

'Go back up there,' Dr Ayres said coldly. 'Leave. On the first train this afternoon. Tonight. Even tomorrow morning may be too late. Nobody knows when Bronze John will strike. Nobody. We don't even know from where.'

'No. Despite a sense of terror I can't control, I am fatalistic. It's my life with Maston that terrifies me. I don't know whether he expects me to contract malaria, whether he looks forward to it. I know only that he hates me. I realize he is justified. But I can't go on like this. I can't reach him. I can only sit here and wait to die.'

Dr Ayres shook his head. 'No. That is what you must not do. The only thing you must not do. I suppose you want my counsel. This is it: Either you run like hell out of here on the first train, or ...'

'I can't do that. I can only go when Maston releases me.'

'Then you are as big a fool as he is.'

'Our marriage is a shambles. But I helped him wreck it. If I can't run, what can I do?'

'Volunteer work at the hospital –'

'Are you insane? I live in terror this far from that place.'

'No. You sit and stew. You go over and over it in your mind. You must not sit and think about this, unless you can divine an answer, and so far you can't. You must get it out of your mind. You've got to run away from it. Or you've got to work so hard and so long you're too tired to think or remember.'

XXII

Never again on this earth, Lizabeth vowed, would she allow herself to be forced into a durance black as this one which began with her volunteering at the hospital. She had never faced such an experience in all her protected life. Not even in her nightmares since Maston had brought her here to Port St Joe had she imagined anything so abominable. The heat that never relented for a moment in the low-roofed structure from morning until midnight. The accumulation of filth. The stench. The death. Dr Ayres' most graphic stories had not prepared her for this hot and savage reality.

For one thing she was bitterly thankful. She was kept in constant motion until she was so exhausted she was ready to drop, her ugly work dress stained with sweat and smeared with blood and excrement. Her legs ached from running the lengths of the corridors, pushing beds, removing slop jars or lifting a dead body out of its pool of black vomit. It was all so vile that she herself had to clasp her throat to keep from vomiting, and the worst of it was that all the effort and energy and devotion, the doctors, the orderlies, the volunteers, the nurses, were all futile.

Maston had accepted her in the contagion ward with a faintly sardonic smile. Clearly, he didn't believe she would last an hour. She was following her latest whim. She hated him when he grinned at her as he hurried past on another fruitless errand. Damn him. She would show him. She would not quit. Nothing – no matter how vile – could make her quit.

By the second day, she was ready to amend her hasty

vow. A nurse left her with a female patient whose face was the colour of oxidized bronze. What the harried nurse had neglected to tell Lizabeth was that the discoloured woman was dying and needed to be observed only to see that she did not throw herself from her bed in her death throes.

Conscientiously, though she dreaded touching her – Jesus, she hated being in the same room with her, the same town, the same godforsaken universe – Lizabeth tried to make the agonized, moaning woman comfortable.

Since sweat oozed from the woman's hair along her bronzed cheeks, Lizabeth drew the curtains to shut out the sun. The room was dimmed into a vague gloominess, though the heat did not let up very much. The whole building was an oven and this crib was breathless. Finding a palmetto frond fan, Lizabeth waved it back and forth before the woman until her arm threatened to fall off at the shoulder. The poor woman smelled so abominably that Lizabeth decided she would be more comfortable if she sponged her off with fresh water. She just kept rolling her head back and forth on the pillow and seeming to grow darker each moment. Lizabeth had never seen a malarial victim up so close and she stared at her in horrified fascination.

She placed an earthenware basin on the side of the bed, filled it with tepid water which was the coolest she had. Then she put her arms about the woman's shoulders to help her sit up. When she moved the patient, the woman cried out. She began to writhe and twist and then suddenly she stretched her mouth as wide as she could. Black fluid spewed out of her, covering and drenching Lizabeth with the heinous, stinking bile.

Lizabeth lunged away and stood there screaming. Her screams rattled through the building and brought everybody, running . . .

After she was washed down with buckets of water, Lizabeth still felt she would never be clean or whole or well again. If malaria were contagious, she was certainly doomed. She was overcome with a cosmic sense of sadness.

Maston paused long enough to say wearily, 'Why don't you go on home, Lizabeth?'

She winced, straightening. If anyone else had suggested it, she would have agreed and run, escaping. Instead, she only shook her head coldly. 'Why don't you go to hell?' she said.

He laughed, winked at her and walked away. She stood and stared after him, shaking inside.

In the days that followed, she grew sick of the hospital, the foul odours, the screams of the dying, the uselessness of every act of kindness or even medical lore. It was all useless. The people she saw one day were dead the next time she sought them, piled awaiting the dead wagon on the screen porch. But it did not matter. The horse-drawn ambulance came racing to emergency with new victims. They all became faceless. At first, the sight of a child, dying in agony was almost unbearable, but at last Lizabeth was able to turn away, to turn quickly away. The heat smote against the roofing and the swarms of fat blue flies banged against the screens. Waves of stench and heat and putrefaction rose up around her.

She knew even more clearly now what had happened to Maston up there at Petersburg when medical supplies and drugs ran out. She saw here the same kind of desperate uselessness and insanity he must have seen at that besieged fort and he had run from hell . . . into hell. She tried to tell him she understood, but he seemed barely to hear her. He was always too busy, or too exhausted, to listen.

She came to dread the walk along those contaminated corridors. The dying lay in beds shoved as close together as possible in the breathless rooms. Some lay dead for hours before they were removed to make way for the latest arrivals. And at the screened windows the swarms of flies were so thick no air could penetrate. Sometimes an orderly flicked the screen with a towel and the disturbed flies rose, muzzing loudly and settled back quickly, writhing, fat and hideous in thick layers. She saw death approaching in the yellowing faces and she fled from it. Everywhere were fresh

pools of vomitus to be washed away and scrubbed down.

The stench of sick-sweet bile nauseated her.

Unable to stand it any more, she shrank back, pressing her hand cupped over her mouth to keep from vomiting. She was aware of Dr Ayres standing beside her, solicitous and watchful. 'Are you all right?'

She braced her shoulders against the wall and cautiously removed her hand from her mouth. She swallowed hard and managed to nod her head. She met his blue eyes and whispered, 'You must vow, Duval, before your god. If I am stricken, you'll administer your "last act of mercy" the first chance you get. Don't make me wait. Please don't make me wait.'

He put his arms about her and drew her against him. She began to sob and she cried helplessly. Orderlies wheeling in new patients from the ambulances, stared at them, but the doctor ignored them and went on holding her gently.

Each morning, Lizabeth wakened with a debilitating sense of horror washing through her, a horror she'd been unable to escape even in sleep the night before.

Maston was already gone and she set out from the house, walking across the fire-blackened village toward the hospital. Everything seemed dead, black and dead, a hideous, plague-stricken land, full of dread and silence. There was only horror or the hot memory of horror everywhere she looked. Even the bay seemed dead and grey and unwholesome. The town appeared condemned, hopeless, and without amnesty or chance of reprieve. The few people she met looked taut-drawn and tense, as though they'd awaited Bronze John until they moved exhausted, in apathy, too terrified even to care any more.

The heat bore down oppressively, even early in the morning, the sun reflected from the wasted earth and the stagnant cesspools. The roads leading out of town stretched silent and empty. No one tried to run any more; they were too tired to run; they felt already lost. The dead wagon

rolled past. Inwardly, Lizabeth withdrew, but outwardly revealed no sign that she was aware of it, or of the black gravediggers with their mournful dirge, 'bring out your dead, bring out your dead.'

As she neared the hospital she saw the racing, horse-drawn ambulances, the black eddies of dust under their wheels. She saw orderlies and nurses hurrying the patients inside – to what? To nothing. All that hurrying and effort and caring – and it came to nothing. It came to death and a place on the screened porch where the stink of death hung heavily now day and night.

This morning they set her to working among the children and this was the most heartbreaking of all because those panic-stricken eyes stared unblinkingly, begging for help, and there was no help for them. She had to wash them down and change their fouled nightclothes, and the day raced past and she was aware of nothing more than a chronic ache in her chest, a rigidity in her shoulders from continually stooping, and a sadness that was going to haunt her as long as she lived.

Working relentlessly, she wondered if she were ever going to overcome that innate sense of disgust she felt at the fetid odour of the sick and dying. She forced herself to take the stricken children in her arms, to hold them close for a moment, holding her breath and forcing herself to smile. But one part of it she could never adjust to, and that was the horrible vomiting death of one of those children. By nightfall, she was exhausted, and when a little golden-haired girl turned black in the face, twisting and writhing and screaming in agony and then suddenly spewing up the black bile, Lizabeth heeled around and went running along the corridor.

Nurses attempted to stop her, but she shook free. She was unable to speak coherently, she wavered on the brink of hysteria. Someone called for Dr Ayres and the doctor came running, dressed to leave the hospital for the night. He caught her in his arms, gripping her arms tightly. 'What is it, Lizabeth? What's the matter? For God's sake, pull

yourself together.'

By now most of the nurses and orderlies had gathered along the corridor to stare silently. Maston came from one of the wards. He walked in agonizing slowness, as if he plodded through knee-deep quagmire. His face was grey and his eyes looked hollow and empty.

When he spoke there was a gentleness and concern in his voice she had never heard before and almost involuntarily, Lizabeth relaxed slightly. 'What's the matter, Lizabeth? What's happened?'

She could only shake her head and gesture helplessly toward the children's wards. Dr Ayres said, 'She's exhausted, that's all. It's too much for her. Far too much for her. I'll take her home now, I'm leaving anyway.'

Maston's gaze was fixed on her. He looked as if he had never seen her before. He tried to smile, but he was too tired. He could not do it. At first he nodded in assent, and then he said to her in a gentle tone. 'Please. Stay. Please. We need you.'

Dr Ayres' voice lashed out, sharp with contempt. 'What's the matter with you, man? Have you no pity? She's exhausted. She's on the verge of a breakdown. She should never have been in this place. You must let her go.'

Maston threw the older doctor a look of hatred, but then shook his head in utter exhaustion. Staring at him, Lizabeth realized he did not even look like the man she'd married, the one she remembered, this was nothing but the skeletal memory of him, overwhelmed by fatigue, even his lips taut and grey, his hands shaking.

'There's so much to do,' Maston said in that low, remote voice.

'Damn you,' Ayres said. 'You know better than that. There is nothing to do. Nothing but to wait for these poor bastards to die. She can wait at home in her bed as well as in this pit of hell.'

'Somebody's got to help,' Maston said, voice weak and uncertain.

'Then you get somebody else to help, suh. I'm taking this

poor, exhausted girl home.'

'We need her.'

'Not in this hospital, you don't. Haven't you enough of these poor devils working their guts out – for nothing? You don't need Lizabeth in this hospital. You don't need her in this pestilent hellhole of a town. If you had an ounce of humanity, or human decency, you would never have brought her here. No matter any supposed justification in your rigid mind, this is inhuman cruelty, and it must end. You must send her out of here.'

Maston wavered slightly. He moved his gaze from Dr Ayres' angered face to Lizabeth's, and again it was as if he was waking from a nightmare in a strange place, among alien faces.

Maston nodded suddenly. He smiled down at Lizabeth wanly. 'Yes. Of course. You're right. She must go. She must go back home at once.' He nodded at Lizabeth again, reassuring her. 'It's all right, Lizabeth. Jim will return you to Tallahassee in the morning.'

Mouth agape, she clung to Dr Ayres' arm for support. She tried to speak, but Maston turned away as if dizzy, unsure where he was. He stepped out as if moving from a steep curb, and sagged silently.

He was unconscious by the time he struck the floor.

XXIII

For some moments the earth seemed to stop on its axis, to pause in its interminable flight. The building shuddered when Maston's unconscious body struck the floor heavily. There followed a stunned quiet. The hospital workers, crowded into that passage, did not move, or appear to breathe. They froze in their tracks as children did in the old game, staring down at the sprawled figure. There was no motion in that shocked few seconds of suspended animation. A debilitating numbness enfeebled them all, a depressing sense of everything's having screeched to a halt,

rudderless. The doctor had fallen and, for that prolonged instant, no one knew what to do, what was to become of them without him to lead them.

At last one of the nurses spoke, a stout woman with a streak of dried blood unnoticed across her cheek. 'Get him to a bed.'

Her voice roused Dr Ayres who objected before the black orderlies could move to obey her. 'If you put him in one of these beds, he'll be back on his feet in an hour, and I suspect, prostrate again in two. No. He needs rest. We'll take him home in an ambulance -'

'But,' the nurse shook her head, her face grey, voice troubled. 'But suppose he's contracted the ...' The woman's voice trailed off; even the hardened professional could not easily put the unthinkable into words.

Dr Ayres shrugged his shoulders; it was certainly a possibility that the overworked medic had succumbed to the plague. 'We'll check on that. Certainly.' Then, with characteristic cynicism, he added, 'If he has yellow fever, he'll be as well off at home as here - and there, perhaps, he can be kept off his feet.'

Lizabeth sat with Dr Ayres in the cab of the horse-drawn ambulance beside Maston's cot. He lay in stunned repose, his head turned to one side, his lips parted. His hair toppled over his forehead and, with tears burning her eyes, Lizabeth thought how like a young boy he looked, a tired little boy. Dr Ayres spoke infrequently but Lizabeth only nodded without answering or even understanding him; she listened without caring what he said. She was acutely conscious of Maston's laboured breathing. She could hear the subdued voices of the black ambulance attendants on the boot of the huge old van. The rhythmic plod of horse's hooves underscored every other sound. Once she heard the crackling of a nearby street fire.

When they reached the old Bales home, Dr Ayres swung down from the rear of the ambulance and helped Lizabeth alight tiredly to the walk. The black attendants carried Maston on a stretcher. Dr Ayres strode ahead of them and

Lizabeth walked silently beside Maston.

On the porch, she held the front door open and nodded the attendants ahead of her toward the stairs. The black men transferred Maston from the stretcher to the mattress easily and undressed him expertly and swiftly.

When the drivers were gone, Dr Ayres revived Maston with spirits of ammonia. Maston awoke without vitality, his eyes dulled and not focussing on anything. He looked around his bedroom in that odd way, as if he were lost in some alien surroundings, then he sank into a deep sleep.

Dr Ayres sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'Let him sleep. Let him rest. Looks like exhaustion. Just watch him. If when he wakes up, he complains of chill and headache and pain in his back and limbs, send for me at once. If he runs a temperature, you have Jim Watkins fetch the ambulance and get him back to the hospital – no sense in your being exposed, or even saddled with a hopeless, thankless job.'

Lizabeth winced as if he had struck her. 'You think it is the fever?'

'I've told you the symptoms. Just watch for them. We'll do all we can.'

'Which, in your language, translates to nothing,' she said in an empty voice.

'I don't make the rules of existence, Lizabeth. I just live by them. I just recognize and accept them. I lie to a lot of other people. I try not to lie to myself – or to my friends.'

Her eyes brimming with tears, she took both his pink, scrubbed hands in hers. His hands were softer than a woman's, without a callous. She said, 'Thank you. I know you do mean well.'

He sighed. 'We'll see what develops by morning . . . In the meantime, you should pack and be ready to leave here. You should leave as soon as possible tomorrow, whether by train, or in your carriage with your driver. Maston has given you permission to go, you must go at once, before he changes his mind –'

'But he may be ill, he may be . . . dying –'

'All the more reason for you to get out of here in all haste. No sense exposing yourself to this contagion one second longer than you have to. And there's nothing you can do for him. I'll have your servant prepare to leave. I'll be here in the morning to see you off.'

She smiled in a twisted way. 'Giving my marriage that little drop of strychnine, doctor – the last act of kindness – when no one is looking?'

'That's right.'

'My angel of mercy,' she said in irony.

He nodded. 'My mercy stroke. A physician learns early on. Sometimes one has to be cruel to be kind . . . and believe me, I am being kind to you.'

She nodded, her eyes chilled. 'It's more than I deserve,' she said.

Alone, with Maston sleeping restlessly on the bed, Lizabeth sat in a wing chair at his side. Lampglow gave the room a strangely unreal sheen, a haunted kind of gloom which she supposed emptily descended over every deathbed. She caught herself up abruptly. This wasn't true. She was letting herself be influenced by Duval's cynical acceptance of doom.

She stared at Maston's wan face through a film of tears. Suppose he were dying? Dr Ayres had seen enough plague victims whether he confided the whole truth to her or not; more important to Duval than Maston's health was her departure from this place. Maybe he'd left a great deal unsaid.

She felt empty in the pit of her stomach. She was overcome with remorse. She had helped destroy Maston and she could not even make him know how genuinely sorry she was. It seemed to her that she had reached that low place toward which she had been racing all the days of her life. Everything she had ever done, every word she spoke, every road or lane or path she walked, had brought her to this moment, every turn and every detour and every devious twist had brought her inevitably here. Maston lay ill. She could do nothing to save him. She could not even

make him know how repentant she was.

She reached out and smoothed his hair from his dry forehead. She left her palm there, unsure whether he was fevered or not. He twisted his head and whispered something, a single word, but she could not understand what it was and he did not repeat it just then.

'I could have been a good wife for you, Maston,' she whispered. 'I wanted to be. But I was already spoiled. Bankrupt. Used. Worthless. And I hadn't even the courage to tell you the truth, to save you at least, even when I couldn't be saved. . . . Even then, I thought we could be happy. I wanted us to be happy but I threw that away too. . . . I spoiled even that . . . because I was rotten, everything I touched rotted.'

She went on sitting there as the silence deepened in the town outside and pressed oppressively against her windows. Shadows wavered and flickered in the corners of the gloomy room.

She watched helplessly as he twisted restlessly on the bed. He whispered a word again, forlornly, in a muffled cry. A word she could not recognize. She bent forward, straining to listen. He moaned faintly and spoke that unintelligible word again.

'Please, Maston,' she whispered. 'Say it aloud. Please. So I can hear it. What is it you want?'

He dampened his lips with his tongue and sagged against the pillow again. In a kind of trance she crouched there, watching his pallid face. Even grey with exhaustion, he was so handsome, but with an inner strength and goodness that meant so much more than a nice smile and symmetric features.

She shook her head helplessly, haunted and agonized by the need to know if there had ever been a chance for them, even the slimmest chance, if there were anything she might have done differently to make him know how desperately she wanted to make their marriage work.

He whispered something and she caught her breath, held it, waiting for him to speak again. She exhaled slowly at last.

'What is it, Maston?' she whispered, close to his face, hating herself because now that it was too late she was certain there was one thing she might have done differently, one thing which might have saved them – if she had lavished all her love upon him and had not thrown it away indiscriminately and defiantly. Defying whom? Maston? Society? The gods? Herself?

She hugged her arms across her breasts. It seemed to her her heart had shifted slightly and pounded slowly, arrhythmically. There was nothing she could say. Nothing she could do. It was too late. It was hopeless.

She sat unmoving, thinking about morning. In the morning she was leaving. He was desperately ill, but he was sending her away. His terrible misjustice had been in forcing her to accompany him, and he was trying to atone for it: he and Duval Ayres would send her home. Home. Something stirred inside her at the thought, to escape this pestilence, the eternal panic and dread, to take up the threads of her life again, the ordinary kind of existence other people seemed to have.

She shivered, watching Maston sleep, restless and disturbed. If she left here, she was certain she would never see him again. Yet, if she stayed, she could only watch him die, and it was already too late, their love was already dead.

She bit her lip. It was as if she were already widowed. She had been his widow for a long time because their love, their marriage was dead.

Maston whispered something and deeply troubled, she put her face close to his, trying to hear that unintelligible word. Suddenly, in this strange, haunted night, nothing else seemed as important as for her to hear the word Maston kept repeating. Her heart pounding, she felt as if that word might somehow hold the key which would resolve everything between them. If only she could make out what he was trying to say.

She pressed closer, holding her breath, listening . . .

She doused a fresh washcloth and dampened his forehead and his dried lips. He opened his eyes for an

instant and stared up at her in a dazed, uncertain way. She tried to twist her mouth into a smile. She bent closer over him, willing him to waken. Before it was too late she wanted to do anything to set things right. She no longer wanted anything for herself.

She could not leave this house until she made him understand that she loved him, and forgave him any trespasses, and would do anything to make up her own evils to him.

She shuddered, ill with loss.

Though his eyes remained opened, Maston seemed not to recognize her. Almost as if in delirium, he whispered that strange, unintelligible word again.

Choking back her tears, forgetting to be afraid of contagion or rejection or pain or loss, Elizabeth lay down on the bed beside Maston. Gently, she put her arms about him and drew his head down against her shoulder. She lay there, cradling him in her arms. Maybe it was for the last time on this earth. But she would not allow herself to admit those words inside her heart. She closed her mind to them.

Despite her remorse and dread, Elizabeth fell victim to her own long-denied needs, her suppressed longings, her savagely repressed desires. The heat and hardness and intoxicating musk of Maston's naked body as it pressed against her own, etched itself relentlessly through her grief, rendering her faintly breathless and empty-bellied.

As if beyond her own will or control, she found her hand smoothing the sinewy tendons corded across his chest, the copper-circled paps like malleable metal in *bas relief*. She had never touched him like this. She'd never been allowed to! Oh God, but she had dreamed of it, lying beside him here in this bed. Helplessly, her hand wandered down over his sculpted body and she revelled in its hardness. Her fingers brushed the crisp cap of hairs at his thighs and involuntarily, she jerked them away to the muscled planes of his flat belly. Fascinated, she drew her trembling fingers along the sharp cleavages of definition upon his chest. His

body sent up a strange, hypnotic warmth. She felt as if she must press closer, submit her own body until she was one with his own heat and strength. She would die of chill away from the warm orbit of his smooth, vital young body.

He spoke again and she started guiltily as if caught in some secret act of vice. Then, breathless, she realized he had only whispered that word one more time.

She pressed her lips close to his, feeling her body grow hot and liquid inside. Her nipples were so tight and hard they ached. Unable to resist, she slipped her hand through his pubic hairs one more time and let her fingers close on his staff. It was flaccid, but she felt it stiffen, responding in her fingers. She moved her hand on it, stroking it gently and yet with burning urgency.

She bent her head over his chest and closed her lips and teeth upon his upstanding pap. She nursed it for a long time, feeling him respond down there. He said something, but the sound of his voice was remote, distant, and she was truly only aware of the pound of her blood in her temples.

Lying there, she writhed free of her soiled hospital dress, of her underclothing. Then, feeling agonizingly wanton and abandoned she pressed her hotly lubricated thighs upon his rigid cock.

She lay there then for a long time, unmoving, pressed against him, her arms locked about him. After a long time she began, timidly at first to writhe and twist her hips upon his, thrusting her own hips inward, pushing herself to him. She kept licking, nuzzling and nursing at his muscled chest, working her stomach muscles upon his, feeling the hot gush of her juices upon him. She willed him to push his hardness up inside her, but he remained unmoving, dazed and less than half awake.

Daringly, she pushed him over on his back and thrust her leg across him. He lay there, only vaguely aware of her, but his rigidity standing up and throbbing. Holding her breath, she let herself down upon it, gasping with pleasure and delight. She began to pump her hips, hesitantly, and then swiftly, abandoned to her need.

He spoke again and she stopped, in mid-stroke. His voice was mildly stronger, a little louder and she waited a tense, prolonged second of agony to see if he would speak again. He did not. She began to pump once more, involuntarily, moving faster, her hair falling and dancing wildly about her bared shoulders. She felt herself rising beyond control and she sank her teeth into her lips to keep from screaming out her pleasure. It was so beautiful she sagged upon him, breathless and for that instant, helpless with satisfaction.

She withdrew and lay beside him, finding him still rigid, his manhood quivering, fascinating her. She wanted to love him, to cover him with kisses as she had never been permitted. Dimly she heard him whispering that word infrequently. Then, without seeming to come fully awake, even to recognize who she was, he pulled her to him. He led her through a litany of delights. She took his glans in her mouth, nursing avidly, her hands grasping his balls, massaging, caressing, biting and licking. Aroused again beyond reason, she thrust herself beneath him and he drove himself to her, pushing deeper and deeper, pumping faster and faster until finally they rose to a climax in unison and sagged together in exhaustion and inexpressible release.

She lay close beside him, content and gratified as she had never been in all her life before. She knew now what she had always wanted, and had never had, the fully shared devotion she had been looking for all her life.

She was tired, but never more wide awake. She felt Maston sag into sleep, but now it was different, the sleep of gratified exhaustion. He breathed deeply and regularly.

She lay beside him, intoxicated with her pleasure, roused to heights she had never even fantasized, because this was a matter of love and not indulgence. This was sharing, of understanding, of – God help her – of true marriage. Marriage of minds, and hearts, and souls and bodies of lovers meant one for the other. Only this kind of passionate giving brought sex above the animalistic level.

She smiled faintly, tracing her index finger along the perfection of his lips. She'd learned something vital tonight,

something she'd never even suspected in her promiscuous searching for gratification. Rewarding sex and true love were identical; they were twins, or they were strangers; it was mating or it was whoremongering. Love without sex might somehow be possible, if not very desirable or even wholesome, but sex without love, she now saw, was a counterfeit. It was shared love which exalted human copulation, put it on the plane the gods must have meant for it, gave it meaning and excitement and rapture unknown.

She lay, wide-eyed through the long, dark hours before dawn. But the time raced past swiftly. She was content to lie beside him, her head braced upon her folded arm, and to watch him whom she loved – and with whom she knew now she could live forever, content and radiant with happiness.

Then, in the first fizzes of false dawn, she heard Jim Watkins stirring in the kitchen and in the yard, hitching the team to the big carriage that would race her away from here.

She felt a flaring of panic. She could not leave him now, not when she had finally discovered what they might have had, what still they might find together. It was not too late. It could not be. It must not be.

And then she found out how late it was, how lost it all was. Maston didn't come fully awake. He stirred and reached for her, whispering something. He drew her against him, her head resting against his neck, her bared body pressed upon his. And then in that tense silence he whispered that word again, only this time she heard it clearly and understood it. It was a name Maston had been whispering through this fevered night, a name unknown to her.

'Marcella,' Maston whispered. 'Marcella . . .'

PART FOUR

1866 THE LADY

She sagged beside Jim Watkins on the boot of her carriage, feeling like a condemned prisoner on her way to solitary confinement. 'We almos' there now, Missy,' Jim said, pointing ahead with his buggy whip. 'You almos' back home now.'

She nodded without speaking. Jim let the tired team of horses plod at their own pace, though their ears did prick up slightly as some instinct told them they were nearly home, nearly at the end of an exhausting journey. Jim didn't believe in hurrying horses beyond reason over any long haul; he loved animals and he pampered them. 'Sometimes – way I figure, Missy – youah life might depend on yoah horses. . . . No sense you pushin' them till they get the heaves or the glanders.' She agreed emptily. 'We're in no hurry.'

'You'll feel better, Missy. Once you gits back amongst your folks an' all. You'll see,' Jim said.

As the carriage rolled uphill toward the familiar centre of Tallahassee, Lizabeth told herself the black servant was right. She should feel elated. She was coming home. She had escaped safely out of hell. She was free of pestilence and dread and panic and the constant smell and threat of death. This was her home! With a sense of astonishment, she saw people going, without pinched, frightened faces, about their ordinary business. For a long time this remained unreal to her. Instinctively, she looked for the drifting clouds of wood smoke, the blackened earth, the street fires, the ambulances racing futilely nowhere.

'I'd forgotten people lived like this,' she said in a vague and empty voice.

'Yes'm, folks do look perky, don't they?'

The old Capitol city had never appeared lovelier to her. Clean and safe and beautiful, untouched by fetid clutch of pestilence. Startled, she watched children run and scream with laughter in the pleasant fabric of shadows beneath huge old hickories and elms and ancient oaks. It was as if

she had come up from some inner ring of hell. But she felt no elation, no relief, no overwhelming flush of pleasure and anticipation. She felt empty and lost, and she looked back to Port St Joe with a longing that was as rending and painful as it was unreasonable and mindless. 'I'm alive,' she whispered.

'Yes'm, glory be to God, you is alive.'

'But that's it. I'm not alive at all. I might as well be dead. Because I left my life back there ...'

Her eyes brimmed with helpless tears, she stared back across that distance to the morning she and Jim had departed the stricken little town. She'd wakened early – the sun seemed to drift into the room as pale yellow mist – and the town was silent, the house was quiet. Still only half-awake, she'd felt herself already at war inside, an exultation that she had found fulfilment beyond her hungriest dreams in Maston's arms, and the cold undeniable fact that in his delirium he had called her Marcella, and he had loved her passionately and to him in his illness, she was Marcella. God knew, perhaps if he had known it was she, he would not have touched her at all. She awoke bereft, her throat choked with tears.

She reached out her arm. Maston was gone. Coming fully awake, she sat up on the mattress and swung her feet to the floor. She saw that his clothing was gone. Somehow he had dressed and returned to that hospital.

She dressed as quickly as possible and hurried downstairs. She did not know what she was going to do, except that she had to find Maston, she had to get him back into his bed.

'Well, good morning.'

Dr Duval Ayres' genial voice stopped her like a fist in her face as she hurried into the dining room on her way to the kitchen to Sarah and Jim Watkins and any news about Maston.

Dr Ayres sat relaxed and at ease at the table, drinking coffee. 'I'm glad you're up,' he said. 'I was just going to send your black girl up to waken you. Your boy Watkins

has the carriage and team ready. You've got to get going as quickly as possible.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I'm not going anywhere. Maston needs me here.'

His voice remained light and amiable, but steel gleamed beneath his pleasantly modulated tone. 'Maston doesn't need you here in Port St Joe at all. He never did. He made an unforgivable mistake. He has come to his senses and realized what a criminal and insane thing he has done to you. He wants you out of here. Today. This morning.'

'I want him to tell me.'

'I'm sorry. I'm afraid that won't be possible. When I got to the hospital this morning, Maston was already there. He was delirious, even then. Hardly knew where he was. On my orders he was put into a private room, and strapped in a bed - '

'I've got to see him.'

'It would not help anything, Lizabeth.' He shook his head. 'You've got to stop thinking about Maston now. You've got to think about saving yourself. About getting out of here alive. While you can.'

'I don't want to go.'

He smiled faintly, the physician who knew best, and not only lacked respect for the patient's opinion, he didn't even want to hear it. 'Well, I'm afraid that's immaterial. Everything is ready. You are going. Now. It's what Maston wants. He wants you out of here, Lizabeth. Now. This morning. That's his only message to you. He said to tell you that you must leave immediately. He also said he is sorry for the way he has wronged you, and he wants only to atone for that wrong.'

She sat, like Lot's wife, staring back at the smoke-blackened village as Jim headed the carriage north through the swamp country. For hours, she rode silently, wrapped in a tight cocoon of her own anguish and loss. Jim said nothing. He sat holding the reins, his dark face faintly troubled, but he waited for her to speak. She massaged at

the base of her throat and tried to speak lightly. 'Won't you miss Sarah, Jim?'

'Miss Sarah makes a mighty tasty bread-puddin' all right, Missy.'

'Will you . . . go back?'

'Masta say I cain't go back. . . . Not till the pestilence is past.'

'He - doesn't want you with him?'

Jim shook his head. 'He feelin' porely when I saw him, Missy. He say he didn't want me with him . . . He say I to stay with you now - and look after you.'

She broke down crying. 'He knows he's not coming home, doesn't he?'

'Don't cry, Missy. Please don't cry. You makes my eyes puddle up, and my throat feel all tight an' sick-like . . . I ain't cried hardly none since I was a little boy . . . please don't make me cry, Missy. . . . Masta say I got to be a man. . . . I got to look out for you.'

She breathed raggedly. 'A man can cry if he wants to, Jim.'

'Yes'm . . . I reckon.' He managed to control his grief. 'But I do has to see where-at we're going.'

They drove along the ill-defined roadway for a long, silent time. Elders and willows grew close against the cleared ruts. Great potholes were brimmed with cedar-black swamp water. The sun blazed down, boiling steam from the gulley and creeks.

She could not escape the sense that she wasn't being liberated from hell, that instead she was being sent into an empty and endless exile. If only the last word Maston had whispered to her hadn't been another woman's name, this parting might have been easier. At least, it would have been less haunted.

She sighed heavily, twisting a knotted kerchief in her fists. She said, 'Jim, do you know the name Marcella?'

He started faintly as if she jabbed him suddenly with a hat pin. He kept his face straight ahead and was silent for prolonged seconds. At last, he nodded. 'Yes'm. I recollect

the name.'

'Did you know her?'

'Yes'm. I reckon so. She a young lady Masta an' me knows slightly well up Alabama way. Back at Blackoaks Plantation.'

'Don't lie to me, Jim. You knew Marcella better than slightly, didn't you?'

'Yes'm. Reckon the fact is, I'se knowed her most of her life. She kinely a close friend of Masta.'

'He was in love with her, wasn't he?'

Jim hesitated again. 'Yes'm, I reckon you could say that.'

'I reckon you could say it too. I want the truth. It doesn't matter. Not any more. He was in love with her?'

'I reckon they kinely announced they banns. That was a long time ago, Missy. Don't mean nuthin' no more. 'Twas before he went away to Tulane to school and tooken me along with him. 'Twas befo' he went into the Confederate Army and up to Petersburg. Seems so long ago now, Missy.'

'Like another world?' she said in irony.

He nodded. 'Yes'm. Long time ago. They fell in love when they was chilluns. When he was twelve years old, him and me used to hitch up a goat to a little ole wagon and we rode the five miles to the big old plantation where Miss Marcella lived. Lawsy, the beatin's we used to get . . . But it didn't stop him.'

'Maybe you're telling me more than I want to know.'

He smiled and nodded and fell silent. She prodded him. 'Well, go on.'

'They ain't much more, Missy. Hardly any at all . . . I knows for a fact that Masta stopped writin' home to Miss Marcella. He even stopped writin' home to his folks at Blackoaks. . . . And when he come to Tally, and he laid his eyes on you, Missy, he jus' about never mentioned Miss Marcella's name. Not round me, anyhow.'

'But they planned to be married.'

'I reckon they might have. They was so young an' all. They looked so lovely together. Made you feel kinely good to see them walkin' an' laughin' together. They laughed

together more'n any two people ever I know. . . . She full of laughter. Always sayin' funny things. Always seein' things funny that other folks missed. They always found a lots to laugh about.'

'Hooray,' Lizabeth said in a low, flat tone.

He looked at her and smiled gently. 'Yes'm. It was a long time ago. Long time ago. Ain't hardly even real no more, not inside my mind.'

'I guess Maston can't forget as easily.'

'It was a long time ago, Missy.'

'Was it?' Her mouth twisted faintly. 'Maybe it wasn't as long ago as you think.'

Once they were in the crowded, downtown street, loud with confusion and shouting, Lizabeth could almost feel that she had never been away. Like Marcella and Maston, and Blackoaks, and Alabama and Petersburg, Port St Joe faded into the abscinded past. Like another world. She shivered in the blaze of sunlight.

As they approached Park, which divided the city, and stretched quiet and sedate and orderly north toward the neighbourhood where Lizabeth had grown up, she felt her throat constrict.

Jim said, 'Reckon you be wishin' to go to Judge Hayward's house? Spect you're lookin' forward to bein' back at home with your mama and papa?'

She stared at him a moment and then she shook her head. 'Home? No. I'll see them later. I'll visit them. I'm tired, Jim . . . I want to go home.'

'To our house, Missy? Hit's all closed. Air tight and suffocatin' and smelly. Ain't likely ready for you at all.'

'You know how to open windows, don't you, Jim?'

He looked at her and smiled. 'Yes'm. Shore do. Done a lot of that in my time.'

'I want to go home. To my home.'

'Yes'm. That'll be fine. I gits Carlotta and Tina. Quick as ever I can round 'em up . . . We fix that ole house up for you - jes' like it was 'fore you went away.'

She sighed and shook her head. 'I don't expect miracles, Jim . . . I know it won't ever be like it was . . . And I don't even know if Maston will ever come back - '

'Sho' he will, Missy. Why, I'd jes' fall down on my knees and cry like a baby if'n I didn't know he be comin' home - soon's ever he can.'

'I don't know if he'll want to see me if he does. But we are going home. If he does come back, if he does want me, I'll be there. We'll be there.'

'Yes ma'am.' Jim smiled and struck the buggy whip just over the sweated rumps of the horses. 'Move, you lazy ole jackasses. Cain't you see we in a hurry to git home?'

XXV

Lizabeth prowled the empty old house, haunted by its silences. The days since her return from Port St Joe piled up slowly, like huge boulders stressfully stacked one upon another for no good reason.

She tried to look ahead through the stretches of hot, empty days in a future without Maston. Any adjustment should be less than difficult. She and Maston had been married no more than a year; their moments of marriage could be measured in hours, their shared happiness in minutes. She barely knew him; she should be able to take up her life without him. But she could not accept the painful truth that she had been parted from Maston before she was able to confess to him how wrong she'd been - God help us, Maston *knew* that - but what he didn't know was how sorry she was for all the hurt she'd brought him.

She wandered restlessly through the house. She wanted to make restitution for her wrongs. She expected nothing for herself, she needed only to be certain that Maston understood, and that he forgave her. That didn't seem too much to ask of a life that until now had lavished upon her everything she could want, and more. But now she felt bereft and bankrupt and hopeless.

She went to the front room window where once she'd watched, empty-bellied for Hampton Gates to come secretly to her. Oh God, how stupid she'd been. Somehow it seemed simple justice that she be punished like this. Maston had sent her home from the plagued village; she'd escaped danger; but she had never been permitted to tell him that she loved him.

She watched the empty street, glittering in hot sunlight. She wanted so desperately to be allowed to tell him that she loved him. She wanted to say only that he was the first person she'd ever truly loved, away from her own mirror. Loving him had taught her how selfish, self-centred and self-devoted she had been since childhood. Only, she had not been permitted to say any of that to Maston. Though she dreaded to allow the thought into her consciousness, she was afraid it was too late now to tell him anything.

In all these days there had not been one letter, or newspaper, or scrap of information from Port St Joe. She was not even certain that mail was permitted out of the pestilent town. She heard nothing. She might as well be on another planet. The lack of any scrap of news added to her emptiness and anguish. The agony of not knowing was a punishment in itself.

Duval Ayres had promised to write to her every day with news about Maston and his condition. There had been no letter at all from the ageing medic. If mail-service were discontinued, she could forgive him. If not, she hated him. Almost as much as she hated herself.

As she turned away from the window, movement on the street caught her eye and she jerked her head around.

Her heart sank. She recognized her father's carriage, the cotton-haired black Ed-Bob on the boot, her parents riding silently and stiffly in the tonneau, looking neither left nor right. Her father had his position to maintain. Her mother came from that generation which believed that if a lady must be seen in public, she bow only slightly to closest acquaintances. She loved them both. She truly did, and she regretted the unhappiness her flightiness and selfishness

had caused them, but God in heaven knew she didn't want to see them just now. She didn't want to see anyone. Forcing company upon her in her present unhappiness was another kind of cosmic punishment.

She walked slowly across the parlour and into the foyer. She threw open the front door as her parents crossed the porch, and she gave them her brightest smile, extending her arms to them both.

They caught her to them, held her between them. Her mother wept. Her father's faded eyes brimmed with tears that, of course, he could neither shed nor acknowledge. In fact he laughed painfully to cover his weakness. No man worth his salt wept, even in private, even over his own daughter. Tears were for women and the weak.

Her mother kept her arm about Elizabeth even as they entered the house. Her father closed the front door and followed them into the parlour.

Her mother wept openly. 'Oh, Elizabeth. It's been a nightmare. We heard stories of such horror from down there. Some of the things I heard, I could not believe Dr Devereau could have even allowed you to accompany him.'

'Now, mother,' the judge said. 'Perhaps he had no idea of the terror down there – until he got there. One does what he believes is best. We all do what we think is best. At least, he sent you back home – safely.'

Mrs Hayward scarcely heard her husband; few wives actually hear anything their husbands say to them after the first ten years and the judge and Nettie Hayward had been bound together in holy wedlock for almost twenty-five years. She had tuned him out long ago.

'Do you know when Dr Devereau is coming home?' Nettie asked.

Elizabeth exhaled painfully. 'I don't even know *if* he's coming home.'

'Oh, darling, you mustn't say things like that. Though, God knows, in widowhood, you'll have the same respectability as a wife. Widowhood is an act of God, and everybody in society recognizes that.'

‘Jesus Christ, Nettie,’ the judge said. ‘What a heartless way to talk.’

Nettie made a cutting gesture toward her husband. ‘Not heartless at all. Of course, I pray with every breath for Dr Devereau’s safety – and his safe return. . . . But we have to face it. As a widow, Lizabeth will be – protected.’

Swallowing back the knot of tears in her throat, Lizabeth smiled grimly. Her mother was considering the only aspect which truly mattered in this society: what people would think. And she was right. By sending her home as his wife, Maston concealed from the world any of the truth about them. He had bestowed respectability upon her. She would be now accepted as she’d never been recognized before – as a lady. To her mother’s world she was now the doctor’s faithful wife, or his grieving widow. But she was a lady. And that was what her mother wanted her to be in society’s eyes: a lady.

Her mother enclosed her in her arms again. ‘Thank God, no matter what. You’ve come home.’

‘Yes, Mother.’ Lizabeth nodded, looking about emptily. ‘I’m home. I am really home at last.’

Lizabeth was upstairs in her bedroom a week later when she heard the doorbell again for the dozenth time in the past few days. She remained unmoving hearing Tina answer the door. Whether she willed it or not, her parents’ visit seemed to signal an on-rush of well-wishers to welcome her back home. They were all most polite, solicitous and warm. They all asked about Dr Devereau, but were careful not to say too much, either to speculate on his health or to give voice to their unspoken fears.

Lizabeth prowled her bedroom which somehow seemed to her a breathless and abandoned cavern. Enduring these agonizing courtesy calls was inexpressible punishment, Lizabeth felt, almost like some gratuitous flagellation. Let up, God, she whispered savagely inside herself. Let up. You’ve made your point. This lady is no lady at all. I’m a bitch. I deserve no better than you’re piling upon me, but

I've had enough.

She walked to the window and stared down at the carriage which baked in the sun of her driveway. While there was something vaguely familiar about the vehicle, she could not place it. She did not care who it was. She was forcing Tina to come upstairs and announce her callers, and she was doing it for only one reason. She was buying all the time alone she could get. She was putting off seeing these people, whoever they were, as long as possible.

Tina's hesitant rap on the corridor door brought Lizabeth around from the window. 'Lady and ge'mmun to see you, Miss Lizabeth. I seated them in the front parlour and told Carlotta to fix tea.'

Glancing at herself in the mirror, Lizabeth crossed the room and opened the door. She followed Tina down the stairway and paused in the front room entryway.

Both Jennifer and Hampton got to their feet, smiling and coming toward her, their arms extended.

Lizabeth touched her lips lightly to Jennifer's cheek and eluded her embrace. Jennifer said, 'Darling, I hope you're not still bitter toward me.'

'Why should I be bitter toward you, Jennifer?' Lizabeth turned away from her. She touched Hampton's hand and quickly dropped it. Whatever he may have read in her body actions and her eyes and her smiles before, she wanted to be certain he no longer misread her desires. 'Hampton.' She spoke in her flattest, chilliest tone. 'How nice to see you again.'

She gave him the phoniest, blankest smile in her repertoire. To her astonishment, rather than resenting it, Hampton looked almost relieved. It was some moments before she learned why he wished to put whatever had transpired between them wholly out of their minds and memory, if possible.

He nodded bleakly and retreated. He stood behind Jennifer and she took his hands in hers, possessively. 'I know how sad you must be, Lizabeth,' Jennifer said. 'Dr Devereau down there in that terrible place, and you

hearing nothing.'

'I'm getting by,' Elizabeth said.

'Of course you are, darling. It isn't as though you and Dr Devereau were deeply in love. You'll miss him, of course, but you should be able to pick up your life rather easily. I want you to know, Hampton and I will do just all we can to help you through a difficult period.'

'I won't need any help, Jennifer.'

'Well, now, darling. I know you're facing a tragedy. But you mustn't shut yourself away from your friends - '

'Why, my front door is always open - to my friends,' Elizabeth said. 'I haven't shut myself away at all.'

'Well, I just want you to be happy, that's all. As happy as you can be - under these dreadful circumstances. I want you to know you can count on my friendship.'

'Oh, I've always counted on it.'

Jennifer smiled and tightened her fingers on Hampton's hand. 'I feel almost ashamed to be so filled with pleasure and happiness and excitement, Elizabeth, when you are so unhappy. But I think you'll want to be the first to know - Hampton and I are going to be married.'

Elizabeth sank her tooth savagely into her underlip to keep from laughing aloud. She stared a moment at Jennifer and then moved her incredulous gaze to Hampton's face.

The tall, slender young dandy looked miserable. Sweat boiled in marbles across his handsome forehead. She saw that he stood in mortal terror that she might in some way expose what had happened between them.

She stared at him and let him sweat.

Jennifer said, 'I know you're surprised, Elizabeth. But speechless? Darling, say something.'

'What can I say?' Elizabeth wondered aloud, the laughter churning inside her and threatening to erupt at any moment.

'Why, say you're happy for us,' Jennifer said.

'Oh, I am.'

'I'm almost as surprised as you, Elizabeth,' Jennifer said. 'Dear Hampton. I just never thought he'd look at little ole

me . . . and when he asked me to marry him – to be *Mrs* Hampton Gates – why, I can tell you, I was just flabbergasted.’

‘I’m sure you were.’

Hampton cleared his throat and they both looked at him. Hampton’s face was flushed red; for this moment, facing Lizabeth, his native urbanity and élan deserted him.

Lizabeth continued to gaze at him, her brow tilted just enough to frighten him to the deepest twist of his colon.

He tried to smile, abandoned it. ‘My – my father decided it was time for me to marry and settle down,’ he said. ‘Naturally, the girl I married had to – to belong to – the best families.’

‘Oh, and Jenny does that,’ Lizabeth said. ‘She certainly does that.’

‘My family has been in this state three generations,’ Jennifer said. ‘And my father was – one of the first territorial governors of Florida – after it was taken from the Spanish.’

‘Impeccable family line,’ Lizabeth agreed.

Hampton winced. ‘Her family was an important consideration. But – I chose Jenny – for her – her virtue. Her chastity. My Jenny is as pure as an angel. That’s what I had to have.’

Again, Lizabeth bit back savage, taunting laughter. She nodded and spoke guilelessly. ‘I’m so pleased, Ham, for both of you.’

‘Are you?’ Jenny said. ‘Are you really? You’re not bitter? Not jealous?’

‘Bitter? Jealous? That you won Hampton’s heart with your purity and chastity, Jenny? Why, I’m not even surprised. Of course I’m pleased.’

‘How nice.’ Hampton seemed to sag in release from unbearable tension. ‘I’m glad you wish us well.’

‘Oh, I do. I’m sure you will both have everything you’re entitled to.’

‘How sweet, Lizabeth,’ Jennifer said. ‘Isn’t that just the sweetest thing, Hampton? I’m glad you’re happy for us.’

‘Of course, I’m happy for you. I’m really pleased. It makes me feel so good, because of all the people I know, you two truly deserve each other.’

XXVI

Lizabeth stared at Tam Beauchard. He stood, tall and uncomfortable, in the middle of her parlour. His fists were somehow jammed into the slashed pockets of his skin-tight trousers. She gazed at him, wondering that she had been fascinated by him, enraptured of him. Suddenly he seemed cheap, opportunistic, self-involved.

She shook her head. That familiar, heavily accented Latin voice no longer sent shivers down her spine; the sight and the sound of him, which once opened her heart and made her ache amorously for him, now left her cold. The professed Cuban lothario could no longer command her with a faint, challenging smile. She saw everything about him as a pose, carefully rehearsed for its devastating effect upon defenceless females.

She smiled faintly because she felt as if she were enamelled in some golden protective coating which rendered her impervious to Tam or his undeniable charm.

The fragile glow of lamplight illuminated his face in a dramatic, if studied way and, watching him preen, her own eyes glittered, fixed on him. A warm night breeze fingered the curtains at the open windows and gently stirred unanchored objects in a spasmodic touch-and-skip across the room. She had the strangely pleasant sense that she was light and free and without anchor, that she might blow away on this night wind, or that Tam might be blown away. Only, he couldn’t, because he was already gone – past and forgotten. This thought filled her with a sudden and exhilarating excitement.

God knew there was no freedom to compare with that of an infatuated woman suddenly freed of her enslavement. She almost laughed aloud. There was no cruelty of which

she was incapable. She spoke in her sweetest tone. 'I'm so pleased to see you again, Tam. But I can't imagine why you are here.'

'I'm here because I haven't changed, *querida*. I am the same as ever. The same now and forever. I still love you deeply.'

'Ah, Tam. How sad for you.'

He winced faintly and the blood rushed up under his dark-bronzed face. He was unlike Hampton Gates; he was smart enough to know when the wine he smilingly poured contained distillation of wormwood.

'And what do you expect of me?' she inquired.

'I expect nothing. My heart is still filled with its passion for you – a hundred times multiplied because I have been forced to live in this empty place without you.'

She gazed at him, without blinking. 'And do you truly think that you could take up with me exactly where we left off?'

'I have prayed so. Life has been empty, *querida*, since you went away. I have been unhappy, unfulfilled without you.'

'How sad for you.'

Again his face flushed. He was not used to being laughed at; his anger flared and he had to fight to suppress it. After a moment he was able to smile.

'And it is not sad for you? You have not a flicker of interest in me?'

'Not a flicker.'

Now he grinned, on more familiar footing. 'I find that hard to believe, my heart . . . I remember too well – aye, God, too well! – the greedy way you tore away your clothes for me, the way we loved. No, *amor mio*, I cannot forget so easily.'

She shrugged and gave him a bland smile. 'I remember you, too, but not all that clearly. Your face fades. Though I do remember the little hairs growing in your nose.'

He strode towards her, tall and rigid. 'You go too far.'

'This is my home, Tam. I didn't invite you here.'

He spread his hands. 'I understand your rage against me. Truly I do. You are enraged because I did not marry you. Did you not think I wanted to marry you and take you back to Cuba with me?'

'Somehow I got the impression this was the last thing on earth you wanted to do.'

'Of course you did, my love. That is because you do not understand my family, my people, their strong sense of church and name. But in spite of all that, I did want to take you with me.'

'Still, we faced some problem, didn't we?'

'Don't be so cold, Lizabeth love. Please don't. Try to understand me. I wanted to take you with me. I wanted nothing more. But – I feared for you.'

'Your concern breaks my heart, Señor Beauchard.'

'No. I can see. Only *my* own poor heart is broken. How often this is true. It is the man who is hurt. I truly was thinking only of your welfare. I knew that among my straitlaced people, you would have been ostracized. We both would have. A mixed-blood marriage. My career would have been destroyed.'

'Mixed-blood didn't deter you from – mixing it up with me – up here. Did it?'

He scowled and prowled the room with that lynx's stride. He turned and lashed out at her. 'That was *your* decision too, wasn't it?'

She drew a deep breath and held it. 'Yes . . . I suppose so . . . And of course, I hold you blameless now. I have no wish to harm your career.'

He lashed out again. 'It is not that at all. You refuse to understand. You make it sound heartless. I was thinking of you.'

'Oh? Were you, Tam?'

'Of course I was. As I am right now. At this moment, I don't care about my career. I don't give a damn about it.'

'Only we don't want it destroyed, do we?'

'My concern was you. I did not think, as I do not believe now, that we – our marriage – could survive the loss of my

status, my job, my family and my church. Not if we hoped to live in Cuba. We would have nothing. We would belong nowhere. Would be outside of everything – without money or income. . . . We had to think about that.'

'I've thought about it, and I insist you go home without me.'

He seemed not to hear her. 'We might have made it. In a more perfect world –'

'Our world isn't all that perfect, is it?'

'– among enlightened people –'

'How many really *enlightened* people can one hope to meet – say in one day?'

'Or one week. Or one year. That is the truth. Plain logic. We live in a world of prejudice. Even those who profess loudest to be liberal and emancipated – they abandon you first.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Don't they?'

'Of all the women I have known, you alone would make me face the fury and rage of my family and my church. But I knew better. My mother is black, proud, vain and intolerant. She would never accept a white woman – a protestant. The church would not accept you.'

She wandered aimlessly around the old room, touching objects without either feeling their texture against her flesh or being aware of them at all. She gave him that overly sweet, meaningless smile. 'Then I suppose there is nothing left to say, except goodbye. . . . Do you return soon to Cuba, Senor?'

He nodded, angered and frustrated. 'Within the week.'

'I hope you will find every happiness you deserve.'

'I'm well aware of your irony, *amor mio*. I am saddened. I have missed you. I have been ill with longing. I was almost ready to throw it all over – family, church, everything.'

'Oh, I wouldn't want you to do that.'

'No. I can see you are quite cold to me. Is it because – by the laws of your country – I am black?'

She sighed. 'I am only what I've been taught. But I would never have known you were black had you not told me. . . .

I can't believe though that the Gates family would accept you – a black man – as a guest in their home. . . . They are the most rabid white supremists I know.'

He shrugged. 'Sunday Baptists aren't the only hypocrites, my love. People will entertain the devil – even with a black skin – if there is profit in it.'

'But a Negro.'

'Sometimes, they have to call him by a different name to make him palatable. Like Cuban. I am not Negroid to the Gates. I am a dark-skinned Cuban. . . . And since I won't see you or Hampton again, I can tell you. He drew far more sensual thrill from mating us – you and I – black and white – than he was able to get from copulating with any woman, even you. He was not all that thrilled about women anyhow, unless he could debase or abuse them. He became quite fevered and helplessly excited when he questioned me about the most intimate details of our intercourse. He grew rigid and trembling and almost incoherent.'

She stared at him. 'You're not only black; you're a black bastard, aren't you?'

He straightened, his back rigid and unbending. His head tilted. 'I did not know I would fall in love with you when first we met. . . . You were,' he reminded her with a chilled resonance in his voice, 'quite an easy conquest, if you remember.'

'I had no idea you were running to Hampton Gates with everything we did.' She shuddered, sickened.

He adopted a more conciliatory tone. 'Perhaps you'll understand if you realize Hampton is a closet pervert. In my country, homosexuality is more casually accepted. But here, it can destroy a man's reputation and his life. Hampton is a homosexual. He gets his excitement only from debasing a woman when he uses a female as a partner at all –'

'But he's marrying –'

'Yes.' Beauchard smiled rigidly. 'Hampton's father, I regret to say, caught Ham in my bedroom – in a most compromising position. On his knees. Old man Gates

ranted and screamed in his fury. The old man decreed that Hampton would marry at once – or be disinherited and banished from family estate and business.'

Lizabeth said nothing for long moments. They could hear the ticking of the old clock in the foyer. She crossed to a table and took up Tambura's top hat and cane. She walked to him with them extended in her hands.

He took them, but without grace. Suddenly he rasped out. 'You've found someone new. That's it, isn't it?'

'Yes. You're most perceptive. I have found someone new.'

'I knew it.' His voice quavered with suppressed savagery. 'A woman like you does not change – if she is wild for it – she stays wild for it ... I might have known ... Would you be kind enough to tell me his name?'

She shook her head, not bothering to smile. 'Why should I? Anyway, even if I did, you wouldn't believe me.'

XXVII

The next days and weeks after Tam was gone, Lizabeth found her life as well as her inner self changing in ways she would never have believed possible. She tried to fill up her time with chores and errands and interests outside herself. She felt as if a burden had been lifted; she felt freed of guilt and those tiny smears of dirt she always brought home from Tam Beauchard. She heard he had returned to Cuba but she experienced only relief and release without even a tinge of regret.

Tired, she sat alone in her parlour, looking back at herself and her lonely existence since she'd returned from Port St Joe. The only word from down there was news of an autumn hurricane which swept ashore from the gulf, inundated the barrier reefs and flooded the village, the swamps and the roads. Many were reported dead, but there were no printed casualty lists available. But, up in these hills, where the sun shone brilliantly, a few vagrant winds

from every direction blowing over garbage crates, outhouses and porch chairs were the only hint of the ninety mile gales that raked the coast along St Joseph's Bay. There was no word from Maston, but she had become inured to this.

The old house was silent. An errant gust of wind shook the dark leaves of the honeysuckle vine on the veranda, patted her cheek lightly and then raced away like a truant boy. Though Tina and Carlotta and Jim Watkins moved about the house as they customarily did when Maston was here, they were quiet without realizing. It was as if they all held their breath, waiting. There was this sense of oppressive silence and tension.

She felt almost with a sense of loss that she was no longer the same person who'd grown up in this town. That girl had departed, almost as Tam Beauchard had gone, and would not return. She worked for charities, she even baked for a church bazaar, though her mother could not drag her along to Sunday services. She hadn't changed that much.

She made work for herself about the house, anything to occupy her mind and her hands. Those jobs Tina despised, didn't want to do, and neglected, Lizabeth herself performed. She no longer upbraided the servant. She simply did the chore herself. Women – neighbours and friends of her mother's – dropped in for tea and Lizabeth was pleasant and patient and didn't order them off the premises. 'So brave,' they whispered among themselves about her. 'So young and beautiful and brave.'

And they brushed away a tear.

'I think you're smart. Really mature, so much earlier, than I ever hoped you'd be,' her mother gushed.

Lizabeth glanced up from her needlework. 'Why, mother. How nice. I've done something to please you at last. Do you want to tell me what it is?'

Her mother gave her a wan smile. 'I think you have finally realized that Dr Devereau is gone. You've accepted it and adjusted to the fact that you'll never see him again. You're making a beautiful, serene new life for yourself.'

Lizabeth stared at her. 'And you're proud of me?'

'I'm so proud.'

Her mother made certain that time was not permitted to hang heavily on Lizabeth. She volunteered Lizabeth's services for many social functions. She did all she could to divert her mind from any sad memories which might linger.

'I know you're having a difficult time,' Mrs Hayward said. 'But you are handling it so beautifully. Everyone is so proud of you.'

Lizabeth shook her head. 'If there were anything else to do, I'd do it.'

'You are taking charge of your new life. If you do find happiness again it will be because you worked it out yourself, you made it work. You did all the right things. You may find new happiness in this life. I hope so. But no matter, I want you to remember, when you are suffering, your mother is near. I can help you. I'll come to you.'

Lizabeth said, 'I see new lines in my face.'

Her mother made a clucking noise of disapproval. 'You are as lovely as ever. If there are lines, they are character lines, and I approve of them.' She got up smiling and energetic. 'And now I want you to go with me to see a lovely garden of azaleas. They're lovelier this year than they've ever been. . . . They'll take your mind off - things.'

Lizabeth put on a wide-brimmed straw bonnet and they walked along Park to visit the lady with the azaleas. The lady was very pleasant, the flowers a riot of colour and remarkably beautiful. There was almost an acre of them, enclosed in a picket fence, and loud with the hum of bees and warm with the sun of late summer. The lady begged Lizabeth to come back any time; perhaps she would cultivate an interest in the lovely plants.

Alone now, Lizabeth looked back at the bright azaleas which faded so swiftly, at the long afternoons, at the endless sleepless nights that she never spoke of to anyone.

Then a dear friend died in childbirth. Lizabeth sat up with her for four interminable nights so that the midwife, the doctor and the harried young husband could get some

sleep. She welcomed the opportunity to sit up all night. She was gentle and patient and caring, but most of all she was tireless. She sat beside the suffering woman's bed through the fever and hallucinations and that slow tormented time when the agonized patient could not go on living, poisoned with peritonitis, but could not die quite yet, either.

When her friend died during one long night, clinging tightly to her numbed hand, Lizabeth put a shawl about her head, kissed the bereaved husband gently on the forehead and walked home in the night streets, alone.

Now, outside her window, the bright bronze dusk shimmered over the street and young girls paraded, arms linked, followed by admiring youths, calling to them and suggesting forbidden things, not in words or even in tone, but in the taut urgency of their abruptly awakened awareness. Breasts were beginning to bulge beneath those bodices, and legs grew shapely under cotton crinolines, and lovely young eyes sparkled, warm and damp. Why, that's me out there, she thought. I'm one of those young girls, and the excitements and delights I wanted so fiercely, were what they all want. I wasn't even bad, or very different, or unusual at all. I was just alive in those frantic years, achingly alive in hot, lost, forgotten afternoons.

The afternoon waned. She sat and watched those young girls, coming close to the young boys and then retreating, like humming birds at nectar. And she saw in them her own girlhood, the joy and delight in life that she had lost. She watched until the girls and boys passed out of sight in the fading sunlight and she felt as if she watched her own beauty fade away before her eyes.

The young girl she had been was gone. She remained, sitting in her parlour, but she was like a stranger, restless and uncomfortable inside her own skin. In a sudden panic, she tried to conjure up reassuring scenes of her own girlhood when she'd been the loveliest, most talked about, most sought-after girl in the state, laughing loudly, uncaring, challenging the elderly, the blue-nosed, the prudish, life itself. She remembered the hurried,

breathless, awkward stolen kisses, the hot, seeking, secretive hands, each taking something of her freshness from her, until it was all gone and she sat empty, bereft and empty.

Tears welled in her eyes, bulged out over her thick lashes to seep along her cheeks. But she was not crying for that foolish, happy girl who was gone, but for herself in this lonely house, and what she might have had and had thrown away.

She heard a step on the walk and the steps and supposed it was Jim Watkins on some errand. She did not move when there was a chime of the doorbell through the silent house. When Tina did not come at once from the kitchen, she got up in the twilight and crossed the room.

She opened the door. She felt her heart sink. Her legs went weak and she was afraid she would fall.

'Well, hello,' Maston said. 'Aren't you going to ask me in?'

Even then, she could not speak. She stared at him, and saw him and still did not believe it. It was Maston, thin, tired and pale, but alive and grinning oddly at her in the dusk.

Constrained, ill at ease, Elizabeth felt like a young girl facing her beau alone for the first time. She swallowed back the tears in her throat. She shook her head and tried to smile. All she could think to do was to go on standing there.

Maston smiled faintly. 'Are you the lady who slept with me on her last night in Port St Joe?'

Crying out, she flung herself into his arms.

XXVIII

The State Capitol stood upon a block-square terraced knoll overlooking the Tallahassee business district. The law temple reposed in a shadowy courtyard of live oaks, magnolias, cabbage palms, bamboos and oleanders. The building had begun in 1839 when the Congress of the

United States appropriated an 'incredible' \$20,000 to 'erect a suitable State house or public building for the use of the Territorial legislature, for the offices of the Secretary of the Territory and for keeping the public archives.' The structure had been completed in 1845, the year Florida was admitted to Statehood. The general style of the edifice was the Italian Renaissance mode, a symmetrical cross-shaped building with central portico and projecting end pavilions. There was already talk of topping it with a golden dome. The main entrance at the east portico was served by a flight of granite steps and the pedimented portico was supported by six modified Doric columns.

These six columns, the two-storied structure and balustrated parapet were finished in buff painted stucco which now reflected the high noon sun. The portico itself was utilized as a speaker's dais and platform, along which were seated state officials, guests, dignitaries and distinguished visitors. People crowded together on the steps, along the approach walks, the grounds and the entire block of the street. Speakers beamed out at this sea of faces and called it the largest crowd ever gathered here in the history of 'our beloved' State.

Maston and Lizabeth sat near the centre of the rostrum, uncomfortably aware that all eyes were upon them. The reason why they were present was of course no mystery. They had been notified by official mail that Dr Maston Devereau and his lady had been invited to the State Capitol on this date, where the Governor would pay tribute to them for their heroism during the crisis at Port St Joe. What astonished and shocked them was the huge outpouring of people, the dignitaries along the dais, the army band and the pennants flapping in the wind.

Maston's first reaction was simple and direct. 'The hell with it. I won't go.' But as the days passed and the moment approached, both of them realized they could not escape the ceremony. 'What the hell?' Maston said at last. 'I can live through an hour of anything – even bullshit. Can't you?'

Lizabeth sat with her shoulder touching Maston's, feeling isolated and alone and disturbed. What was she doing here? Didn't these people know Maston had in anger and rage forced her to go with him to Port St Joe, and that she had gone unwillingly, protesting every step of the way into the pestilence? Evidently not. She felt her mouth sag open slightly when she heard a speaker call, 'tribute to this heroic medic and his loving and faithful spouse.'

Shocked, she glanced from the corner of her eye at Maston and found him fighting back laughter. At the sight of his concealed derision, she suddenly had to clamp her teeth tightly together to dam back jeering mockery.

Keeping her face straight ahead, she whispered from the corner of her mouth. 'Is he talking about me?'

Maston bit harder on his lip and shook his head, unable to speak.

In order to constrain her savage need for laughter, Lizabeth tried to shut out the words the endless list of speakers were mouthing. She concentrated on the hundreds of upturned faces baking in the blaze of sun. Her gaze touched at Hampton and Jennifer, standing together on the steps. The old arrogance gleamed in Hampton's face, and Lizabeth felt her heart constrict at the bewildered look of distress glittering in Jennifer's harried eyes. I could tell you what's the matter, Jenny, Lizabeth thought, but I know you don't want me to . . . what's wrong with your marriage isn't nearly as important to you, even now, as what people will think

She glimpsed her father and mother, sharing the stage as State dignitaries in a row of Supreme Court Justices and their ladies. The light shining in her mother's face declared it all worth it, all of it. Her father looked retiring, his eyes stricken; yet, though he was physically a little man, he was the most dignified of all.

Beyond them were the survivors of the Port St Joe plague and hurricane disasters. It transpired, as the speeches droned on and on, that the true aim of this rally was to collect relief money for the flood and pestilence victims. As

the speakers each reminded them, in turn, they must all let the sacrifice of this 'brave young doctor and his faithful wife' inspire them all to compassion and generous donation.

Governor David Walker was most eloquent of all. He was the new state executive, the first official elected since the end of the war between the States and he himself was a symbol of the orderly transfer of power from the U.S. military army of occupation to civilian authority.

Governor Walker invited the crowd to 'gaze in delight and pride upon this handsome – no beautiful – young couple. Beautiful in spirit and courage and in mutual love and devotion. A shining example of old-fashioned purity and beauty in holy wedlock. Lovers willing to sacrifice themselves for the safety and security of others.'

The governor swore he 'had no words adequately to express the debt and gratitude of all of us to this young couple.' He said he had no words but he spoke for an hour, and the crowd stood in the sun and listened, and Lizabeth watched them, as if somehow standing aside from it all and watching in wonder and disbelief.

The Governor had come here, he said, 'not to bury Dr Devereau, but to praise him . . . find it beyond our poor powers to convey the terror he faced and his unflinching courage in the face of that horror . . . he and his lady gave of themselves beyond the call of duty, beyond even the demands of the Hippocratic Oath . . . In that pestilence, they stood steadfast . . . persevering . . . unyielding either to fear or fatigue . . . they worked around the clock against a foe who struck from everywhere and against whom there was no antidote, no weapons . . . unsleeping . . . unflagging . . . indefatigable . . . indomitable. They stand, beautiful, constant, tenacious, and no matter how overwhelming the odds they never retreated a step.'

Finally, at the end of an interminable hour, the governor brought Maston up beside him, calling him the 'finest example of young American – and Southern – manhood.' The crowd went wild, and there were even rebel yells from

the fringes. Then the governor summoned Lizabeth to stand beside Maston, '— as you stood beside him in the plague at Port St Joe. I know, ladies and gentlemen, that Dr Devereau would tell you, he could not have faced the hell, the rigours of that place without the faithful, unflagging support and constant integrity of his loving wife. She refused to leave his side — working with him in the pestilent hospital itself — until she was ordered back home up here by another physician when Dr Devereau fell ill and yellow fever was feared. . . . Again, this lovely lady proved her quality, her inner strength and her steadfast devotion. She lived weeks without word from her beloved husband down there in pestilence and storm. She did not know whether he lived or was dead. Yet, she remained true, faithful, keeping his home for him until at last he could come back to her . . .'

It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon before it was over and Maston and Lizabeth could writhe their way through the press of people and escape to their home. They saw that these people wanted heroes; they needed something and someone to believe in and they focussed upon Maston and Lizabeth in a way that was almost pathetic, nearly hysterical and passionate.

Looking at those people, both Maston and Lizabeth understood, without words passing between them, that the only way to give these people the heroes they needed so desperately was to swallow back the savage laughter gorging up inside them. And they kept their faces straight until they could escape.

Lizabeth giggled once in the buggy, driving home beside Maston. He erupted with a single burst of laughter. But they did not really laugh until they entered the quiet old house and locked the front door.

They sagged against it then and dissolved in laughter. They laughed until they cried at the terrible irony of this celebration of their bravery and constancy.

Maston stared at her, his eyes filled with tears of laughter. 'Me?' he said. 'Me? A hero? Army deserter?

Living under an alias? Me?"

"And their heroine?" Elizabeth said, shaking her head. "Me? A harlot?"

They laughed. They laughed until their sides ached. They were afraid they could never face anyone again because they could not stop laughing.

"You see," Maston said. "It's all really very simple. People don't want the truth. They want heroes. They'll believe lies so they can have their heroes. It's all very simple."

"Very simple," Elizabeth agreed and they went off into paroxysms of laughter again. And laughter brought them together, united and cemented and enjoined as nothing else ever could. In the shared heat of laughter there was even that blinding-hot flash-flame of bonding which might prove permanent.

Elizabeth tried to stop laughing and could not. She put her head back and laughter spewed from her mouth. She laughed helplessly. Maston took her by the arm and led her gently up the stairs.

"Where are you taking me?" she managed to gasp.

"Upstairs. To bed," he told her.

"In the middle of the afternoon?"

"Time has no meaning for heroes."

They stood on the stairs, clinging to each other, laughing. "That may well be," she was able to say at last. "You're a hero downtown. You are even a hero to your own servants. But how heroic are you in bed?"

He spread his hands. "I make no advance boasts about my prowess upon a mattress, ma'm. I say only that I shall die trying."

"Heroically, of course?"

"Of course."

"Ah," she sighed and sagged against him. "Just what I've been looking for – all the days – and nights – of my life."

Maston waited until she had closed the bedroom door behind them and locked it. Then she turned towards him, her eyes awash with need, her lips tremulous.

He went slowly to her and took her in his arms. He stood

near the window for a long time holding her. She stirred slightly, but he tightened his embrace and she relaxed with her face buried against his throat, her arms locked about his neck. He bent his head until his mouth was close to hers. 'I love you,' he said. 'Almost as much as those clowns said I did. . . . And I've always loved you. From the first moment I saw you.'

And Lizabeth sighed. She understood at last what she had been looking for so avidly and forever. She had it now; she would keep him forever, and for this moment, she lay, content, in his arms.

THE END